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EDUCATION
AND
DIGITAL LIFE

FOUNDING DECLARATION
OF THE LYCEUM INSTITUTE

&

RELATED ESSAYS

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This brief declaration outlines the vision of the Lyceum Institute: the cause which it answers, the good which it seeks to provide, and the means, stated in general outline, by which it seeks to accomplish these ends.

It is succeeded by a series of essays which further articulate the importance and vision of the Institute.

EDUCATION AND DIGITAL LIFE

THE FOUNDING DECLARATION OF THE LYCEUM INSTITUTE

Do we need another educational institution? Should we not strive, instead, to restore the older, already extant institutions—our colleges, universities, high schools? Can we not reform? Must we *revolt*? These are legitimate questions, but they do not apply to the situation in which we find ourselves: for they are questions that apply only to an older paradigm, to a world before the advent of the digital. Today, education need no longer be subject to all the constraints which have impeded its pursuit, such as time, place, and the expenses attendant thereupon. While the kind of education provided by an immersive in-person environment, such as that of the good liberal arts university, cannot be replicated by any digital substitute, not everyone has the time or ability to spend four-to-ten or more years immersed in the university environment: nor can society allow for such.

Yet we can certainly not allow if our society is to have a fruitful culture that the kind of education once given through every level of schooling as permeated by the liberal arts—the kind of education that nourishes the human soul and makes the person more than his or her circumstances—be relegated to the rare, refined citizen. Such an education does not make the human fit for a consumerist, industrialist, mechanistic society; and so it is pushed to the margins of today’s university; now in the business not of elevating the soul, nor educating the mind, but of selling skills—including, in many of those highly-reputed institutions yet retaining some department of liberal arts, the skill of sophistical pretense.

As the modern bureaucrats running our institutions stifle, defund, and push true education to the outskirts of the university, we find fewer and fewer persons familiar with the genuine pleasures of an intellectual life, the pleasures through which one becomes a good citizen and a solid foundation for the cultural world of human flourishing. This diminution of learning not only denigrates our culture—segregating it unjustly into spheres of the intellectual elite and the “common” person—but denigrates every individual, whether educated or “rustic”, whether learned or ignorant. That is: it makes us ready to believe, and oft unwittingly, that an accident of our learning constitutes its essence; but the intellectual life does not occur in universities. It can occur only in the intellect we each possess and in which we share. To quote Zena Hitz:¹

Intellectual life is not merely a professional activity, to be left to experts. Because its central goods are good universally, it belongs in taxicabs, at the beach house or the book club, in the break room at work, in the backyard of the amateur botanist, in thoughtful reflection whether scattered or disciplined, as much as or more than it does in universities.

¹ Hitz 2020: *Lost in Thought: The Hidden Pleasures of an Intellectual Life*, 24.

That is: the University has long given us great fruits of intellectual life, and at times still does so today. But the University was never intended to *contain* the intellectual life, but rather to be a font of its nourishment.

Today, we sustain an enduring illusion of our universities (most especially the so-called Ivy League), believing their long-standing pedigree guarantees current excellence, insight, the best of opinions, and the sharpest of minds. In truth, few of their matriculants have acumen for more than elite success at the university system. In the words of T.S. Eliot, himself having once completed a bachelor's degree in the Ivy League:²

Any educational system aiming at a complete adjustment between education and society will tend both to restrict education to what will lead to success in the world, and to restrict success in the world to those persons who have been good pupils of the system.

Today, this success in either the system or in the world seldom depends directly upon the student's own intellectual ability and much more upon ideological commitments, competence as a functionary within a mechanistic corporate structure, or the connections, influence, and financial benefit gained by that student's admission and happiness as an alumnus.

The University today—with exceptions, of course, not only among institutions but by the courageous striving of faculty and students who still know and desire the good of truth—not only no longer fulfills its purpose but is unsuited for recovering that purpose and continuing it in the digital world. Thus our goal is neither reform nor revolution. Our goal is the flourishing of the intellectual life, in all its potential avenues, for all with the courage and desire to seek it: our goal

² Eliot 1948: *Notes toward a Definition of Culture*, 101.

is the growth of truth, a growth in truth, a growth in that through which human beings flourish—not in the always-fragile conditions of material wealth and well-being, but the indomitable good of the spirit.

But how is this to be achieved?

1. THE NATURAL HUMAN GOOD

“All human beings, by nature, long for knowledge.”³ Composing the opening line of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, these are words familiar to many, and have rightfully inspired reflection for millennia: reflections on human nature and operations, as well as the good at which we, commonly human, are aimed. To long for knowledge: this is not merely to want knowledge for some ulterior motive—making money, gaining power, defeating your enemies—but for its own sake. We want to know because knowledge fulfills us, because it satisfies a need we experience, a need we *suffer* in every encounter with our own ignorance. This longing is what Aristotle meant, and this fulfillment by knowledge, indeed, *is* what we long for by nature.

Many, both in the present and in decades and ages past, have suffered a diverting and anesthetizing of this longing by the proliferation of easier and lesser pleasures: why read, when you can watch a documentary; and why watch a documentary, when you can watch a comedy? In the ubiquity of immersive entertainment media—radio giving way to television, to the internet, to streaming shows and movies seeping through every device in our homes—the slide into the ease of unthinking pleasure appears obvious. But the diversion of our natures from their proper good occurs not only through our entertainments and pleasures, but is

³ i.348-30BC: *Μετά τα Φυσικά*, 980a21.

further fostered today even by the supposed institutions of learning—even, or perhaps especially, the most vaunted—which have themselves departed the path along which knowledge is sought, and instead flung themselves down the slippery slope of merely conveying standardized sets of information, or, far worse, disguising social activism in the garb of intellectual enrichment (the latter being merely the logical conclusion of abandoning, among other truths, the centrality of classical logic). Rather than learning to discover *what is* through their own efforts, therefore, students are taught to receive and retain pre-packaged information about what is (or what is purported to be—no matter how discordant those claims from the cognition-independent reality), so that they might serve as functionaries for *how we want 'what is' to be*: information discovered, interpreted, and arranged by others, to the occlusion of—and thereby depriving us the freedom to ask—that most-human of questions, “*What is that?*”

Is this knowledge? Is it learning? We desire to know; but is that the same as receiving information, pre-determined, pre-packaged for us? The currently common view of the universe—a reductionist view that posits the most-elemental parts of matter to be the truest reality, such that all other phenomena are merely various configurations thereof—holds that knowledge amounts indeed to nothing more than an organization of information; that our ability to know consists in the right configuration of parts in our minds, or even more reductionistically, our brains; and that what we signify by “information” is only a certain abstract descriptor of this configuration. Per this view, what is contained in a computer’s hard-drive and a human’s mind are simply two different material configurations of the same thing, revealed in its sameness through such an abstraction. Computers themselves were once explained as being like electronic brains; now, brains are conceived of as organic computers in a reversal of the metaphor that has succeeded not only in spreading a misunderstanding of what the brain is or

does, but more importantly, and perniciously, has affected a widespread acceptance that the mind reduces to the brain.

That is, the brain *does* play an essential role in our cognitive lives—as is well demonstrated by the cognitive deficiencies exhibited in those suffering damage to the organ—but likewise are *all* the organs by which we sense and navigate the world *integral* to our cognitive action; and so, too, are the things that we sense, the environments in which we live, and the *ideas* we encounter; ideas which are irreducible to these material beings towards which they orient us. If the brain's essentiality to the existence of the mind means that the “mind is what the brain does”,⁴ does that mean that the mind is also what the body does, and the objects operating on the sense faculties of the body, and the ideas conveyed to us by language—in sum, that anything without which we would not or could not think as we do—should also be said to have their activities constituting the mind? Is the mind “what the brain, body, and world around us” collectively do? Perhaps that is true, in some way; but it is not very helpful for understanding what the mind really is, especially as something distinguished from the brain, body, and world.

No. No thinking person can accept this flattening, this levelling out of what we know from our own experience to be different. The mind is manifestly something more than any of its contributory sources or its necessary, integral parts, and—rather than by an enumeration or description of its materially-constitutive parts—we know any object of our inquiry best by discerning its characteristic action.

The action of the mind consists fundamentally in the **seeking** and understanding of the world in the light of knowledge; and knowledge subsists as a relation to the

⁴ Steven Pinker 1997: *How the Mind Works*, 21.

intelligible truth of objects themselves—the relation whereby is grasped the articulable reality of *what is*. This seeking unfolds through observation and a questioning after what is observed: that is, observation and questioning which begets recognition that the things observed have explanations, *causes*, beyond what the observations themselves entail; and the subsequent attempt to discover those causes to better explain the observed effects. The phenomena of our experience, in other words, are not self-explanatory, and what we mean by “knowledge” *is* just such explanation: the grasp of the causes, not merely inchoate, but in a manner that both the causes themselves and the grasp of them can be verbally expressed. These explanations must be worked out with trial and error, with continued recursion to certain principles—which themselves must be discovered with some difficulty—with experimentation, reflection, and most of all a habit of *inquiry*; to continue questioning, again and again, seeking always to better understand what we have revealed, always seeking better to grasp the **relation** between cause and effect.

It is this knowledge, which grows into wisdom, that all human beings desire.

In the first quarter of the twenty-first century, the in-itself character of this good—the good of understanding—has been all but lost from the Western world. After the gradual diffusion of vague belief, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in the unquestionable merits of progress, of advance, of technological mastery and of material benefit—belief that persisted despite the grave tragedies it rendered in the two World Wars—the truth that the most desirable human good consists in something belonging to a stable human nature, to something had by every human being from time immemorial, can hardly be grasped. The atmosphere of our culture suffocates under a miasma of purposeless purposes: acquiring wealth, products, status, jobs, careers, degrees, honors,

reputation, celebrity, accolade, success, “love” (that is, affirmation of one’s choices, regardless of what they are); defining one’s image, one’s brand, elevating one’s profile, curating personas, cultivating cultures of infinitely regressive self-reference—for outside the self, there is no believed-in source of meaning that appears itself to be firm. Knowledge thereby becomes only a means to some further end, which end is sought for the sake of serving some purpose invented, rather than discovered.

But the ability of human beings to sustain such fabricated purpose inevitably weakens, incapable as it is as being fed by reality.

That we have purpose as an enduring end for ordering the operations of our lives requires that it be discovered, unveiled in some reality not so fragile as those of our own making. This truth ought to appeal to any common-sense reflection upon the world and our lives within it: things are principally what they are, of themselves, and not of our making. Whatever ordering we put into natural materials, to turn them to some purpose other than that towards which they were originally ordered themselves, depends upon what is in those things in the first place. That a thing could have a *purpose* not due in some regard to, or at least coherent with, its own natural being, but purely from our arbitrary imposition thereupon, would require of us the ability to constitute that purpose *ex nihilo*. It would require us to think truly *original* thoughts—thoughts that have not come, somehow or some way, from beings outside of ourselves. It would require us to be Gods—not mere minor deities of a Grecian pantheon, but Supreme Creators, independent not only of the world but also of one another.

Put otherwise, while we are responsible for the conjoining and dividing of concepts, for putting together or tearing asunder the thoughts we have, at no point do we *create* thoughts. Just as we cannot transform some natural being into an

otherwise-purposed artificial product unless the natural being has some properties that would allow for this repurposing, so too we cannot even conjure the most perverse of purposes for the objects of our experience unless they, independently of us, possess a nature to be treated perversely. That a thing *not* be put to perverse purposes requires that we discover and understand that nature, and subsequently see to what purposes it may *fittingly* be ordered.

This relation between discovery and ordering applies also to ourselves.

That is, we cannot but sooner or later *misuse* our own faculties, and the faculties of others, if we fail to understand ourselves. And we do not understand ourselves—nor anything else, for that matter—by default or innately. Though there may be a certain natural aptitude, given our own nature, for us to discover the truth of the natures of any things we do in fact encounter, this aptitude does not develop automatically; and it may be diverted, obscured, and blunted by the aforementioned malfeasance of educational institutions or diffusion of false ideas throughout society. (Indeed, even our unique access to our own experience—being the ones who *have* the experiences—becomes distorted as a source of knowledge, most especially when it is deemed sufficient or even superior for gaining self-understanding.) Because we are not pure intellects, pure minds, we may be led through countless confusions and contortions in our bearing towards the good.

How do we attain the good, unless we know what it is? How do we know what is good *for us*, unless we know ourselves—and what, therefore, we need, what we desire, what *fulfills* us, in the highest part of our nature and as a whole and not simply this or that part of ourselves? We may think ourselves not to want truth but simply to want the good, that is. But we cannot know what the good is without the truth. Thus, the truth is necessary to the attainment of any good.

But, moreover, the truth itself *is* a good, and not only because it informs of the good of other things, but because it fulfills itself *what* we human beings are. We want *truth* because it is *good*, and it is good not only because it entails the truth about other goods. Why? To *know*—this endures. To *understand*—this enlarges us. Knowledge expands the world we inhabit; it deepens the colors we see, the flavors we taste, the odors we smell; it turns a touch into a sign, and a sign into a symbol. It brings the knower and the things known into a unity greater than either alone.

The greatest knowledge of all receives the name of **wisdom**: which is not simply knowledge of some object, but knowledge of the *highest principles*—and subsequently, implicitly, of those things whereby all others are ordered. We consider some persons wise in metaphorical respects when we see, for instance, that they know not only the tools and tricks of a trade, but how to fit it all together in a variety of circumstances; when and how and where to use what, together with what else. There is a kind of wisdom in the master carpenter, especially seen in contrast to the apprentice, insofar as the wiser has a profound knowledge and understanding of the principles they both must observe. But those who know the *highest principles* of all things—even if that knowledge is but a weak, tenuous grasp—have some insight into *all* things, and especially toward what all things should be ordered, at the very least in a general manner. Thus, no breadth of knowledge, no diversity of subjects mastered, no expanse of comprehension, ever reaches completion or fullness without wisdom, and no community of knowledgeable persons, no matter how numerous, will use its knowledge rightly in the absence of wise persons.

All human beings, indeed, long for knowledge—and, most of all, for wisdom; for the knowledge that makes sense of all other knowledge, for the knowledge that knows the good of knowing.

2. TRAINING OF THE MIND

To gain knowledge, and most of all to gain the knowledge of wisdom, is a matter not simply of studying, of receiving information, of reading or listening, but a matter of *habit*, and a habit of pursuing the truth with an actively-inquisitive approach: which is to say, a habit of humility before one's own ignorance. One does not acquire such a habit automatically or by default, or by mere exposure to knowledge, nor in a short time, and struggling to attain it by one's lonesome will demand of the individual Herculean effort for even minimal achievement. Try sincerely enough to list what you would know in life from pure discovery made without the aid or intervention of other human beings and you will learn that even that handful of things which appear as discoveries of your own have, in some or another measure, depended upon the teaching of others.

While we may by ourselves today make many discoveries through books and articles, through the accumulated and distributed insights of authors, scholars, thinkers, philosophers, scientists, and any others who have pursued and expressed their inquiries into the world, this alone does not make up the reality of human learning, but is a part only.

If we wish our learning to flourish, we ought instead to seek out a community of the like-minded, where we may receive some training, and especially that training which sharpens the mind's own natural propensities for discovery. Consider these wise words of John Henry Newman, from his insight-laden *Idea of a University*:⁵

Truth of whatever kind is the proper object of the intellect; its cultivation then lies in fitting it to apprehend and contemplate truth. Now the intellect in its present state, with exceptions which need not here be specified, does not discern truth

⁵ 1852: *The Idea of a University*, Discourse VII, 109.

intuitively, or as a whole. We know, not by a direct and simple vision, not at a glance, but, as it were, by piecemeal and accumulation, by a mental process, by going round an object, by the comparison, the combination, the mutual correction, the continual adaptation, of many partial notions, by the employment, concentration, and joint action of many faculties and exercises of mind. Such a union and concert of the intellectual powers, such an enlargement and development, such a comprehensiveness, is necessarily a matter of training.

We may walk around an object, look at it a thousand times from two dozen angles, and yet still see it somehow anew when another person tells us to look at it a different way, in a new light, with an awareness of its history, or an explanation of why it looks the way it does, or in a comparison to some other object: “the conversation of all is a series of lectures to each, and they gain for themselves new ideas and views, fresh matter of thought, and distinct principles for judging and acting, day by day.”⁶ The training of the mind occurs never in a vacuum, but precisely through the discourse which *draws forth* the natural faculty of the human mind into the explicit, conscious, insight-borne articulation of the real. To continue from Newman:⁷

And again, such a training is a matter of rule; it is not mere application, however exemplary, which introduces the mind to truth, nor the reading many books, nor the getting up many subjects, nor the witnessing many experiments, nor the attending many lectures. All this is short of enough; a man may have done it all, yet be lingering in the vestibule of knowledge: — he may not realize what his mouth utters; he may not see with his mental eye what confronts him; he may have no grasp of things as they are; or at least he may have no power at all of advancing one step forward of himself, in consequence of what he has already acquired, no power of discriminating between truth and falsehood, of sifting out the grains of truth from

⁶ Ibid, Discourse VI, 106.

⁷ Ibid, Discourse VIII, 109-10.

the mass, of arranging things according to their real value, and, if I may use the phrase, of building up ideas. Such a power is the result of scientific formation of mind; it is an acquired faculty of judgment, of clear-sightedness, of sagacity, of wisdom, of philosophical reach of mind, and of intellectual self-possession and repose, — qualities which do not come of mere acquirement. The bodily eye, the organ for apprehending material objects, is provided by nature; the eye of the mind, of which the object is truth, is the work of discipline and habit.

This process of training, by which the intellect, instead of being formed or sacrificed to some particular or accidental purpose, some specific trade or profession, or study or science, is disciplined for its own sake, for the perception of its own proper object, and for its own highest culture, is called Liberal Education; and though there is no one in whom it is carried as far as conceivable, or whose intellect would be a pattern of what intellects should be made, yet there is scarcely any one but may gain an idea of what real training is, and at least look towards it, and make its true scope and result, not something else, his standard of excellence; and numbers there are who may submit themselves to it, and secure it to themselves in good measure. And to set forth the right standard, and to train according to it, and to help forward all students towards it according to their various capacities, this I conceive to be the business of a University.

What Newman describes—this training of the intellect to discriminate between truth and falsehood, to sift out the grains of truth, this scientific formation of mind through discipline and habit—is a perennial need for the human being. It requires, moreover, a *tension*: between carrying out the training with rigor and with flexibility, between adopting attitudes of seriousness and of levity, between being stern and being joyful. All training and especially that of the mind becomes, at one or another point, tedious, difficult, a challenge not simply because the things being studied are hard to grasp and hold on to, but also because we ourselves are prone to distraction and dissuasion, by lower pleasures and easier routes. It is easy to take a break from, for instance, studying a language—and

never return; it is common to say we will begin reading that book tomorrow—and to always leave it for tomorrow; to intend, but never act. If look at the past track of our aspirations, how many unfulfilled, half-finished, or barely-begun pursuits of study lie discarded to the side?

Left to our own, we tend not towards the higher but the lower; not towards the difficult and ennobling, but the easy and diminishing. We, walking alone, may run into obstacles—a word or phrase we do not comprehend, an argument we cannot follow, the passive periphrastic in Latin, an unfamiliar manner of describing a common object we thought, previously, that we understood, and now discover our presumed understanding thrown into question—and find our individual willingness to overcome the difficulty wanes quickly. Or perhaps we step quickly along the path, only to find it branching in several different directions at once, unsure of where to go next: should I study Latin or Greek? French or literature? Should I read Augustine before Aquinas—should I pick up phenomenology, or can I even do that without first reading Immanuel Kant? Is it worth reading Martin Heidegger, or do his Nazi sympathies and antisemitic points of view disqualify his thought? Were we good enough guides for ourselves in education, we would possess already that which we seek. Thus, we have long relied upon institutions, such as the University, to encourage us in, and to structure for us, the pursuit of education. So much of education, that is, relies upon the help of others; not only in the ordering of and transmission of knowledge, the directing and clarifying, the demonstration of causes and their relations to effects, the leading toward wisdom; the rigor and flexibility, the seriousness and levity, the sternness and joy; but also the **atmosphere of common purpose**. The possibility of any good is easier believed in and thus pursued—including the merits of truth and wisdom sought for their own sake—when there are others striving alongside us, compatriots who believe in and are pursuing the

same ends, who uphold conviction in those goods' value just as we do ourselves. Most especially is this true when the beliefs concern ends difficult to attain. Thus we have long taken courses, within degree programs, or core curricula; we will befriend classmates, form study groups; attach ourselves to professors and mentors. We strive for degrees as signs of completion, of having learned *enough*.

But the University itself, considered generally in the various institutions claiming the name—with some exceptions, of course—has fallen far from the vision which Newman described: having slipped off that lofty height of cultivating the mind to apprehend and contemplate truth and into the narrow trenches of particular and accidental purposes, specific trades and professions, studies and sciences—trenches choked with the seldom-imposed growth of bureaucracy, institutional hubris, and individual ego. They no longer train the mind for anything but, as Eliot said, “what will lead to success in the world”, success in the world being restricted “to those persons who have been good pupils of the system.” As the early twenty-first century has shown, the system may be itself turned far from contemplation of truth: the institutions of education today seem increasingly bent towards *imposing* one's will on the world, rather than *opening* one's mind to the real, and many of the supposed educators seem increasingly inclined to *forming an audience* rather than to *guiding inquiry*. Unsurprisingly, these failures in training the mind go hand in hand. As the twentieth-century Thomist philosopher Josef Pieper writes: “Any discourse detached from the norms of reality is at the same time mere monologue. What does it mean, after all, to be detached from the norms of reality? It means indifference regarding the truth.

To be true means, indeed, to be determined in speech and thought by what is real.”⁸

Conversely, the mind, to be well-formed in truth, must become familiar with grammar, logic, rhetoric, with literature and history and philosophy, not as a matter of the individual passing through a *system*, but as a matter of *gaining conversance with truth*. These studies are not merely a matter of giving the mind certain tools with which it may subsequently undertake its own expeditions of inquiry, but the cementing of a foundation upon which future discoveries may be built—or, in a more apt metaphor, these studies plant the roots from which one’s future discoveries *grow*: for the goods of the intellect are themselves *living*, and give rise to future life.

Many of the universities as they presently exist, and perhaps even the University itself, may sadly be barren beyond redemption. Yet the ideals outlined by Newman are not; and while we cannot yet *displace* the University, nor supply all that it once did or yet does, we can still seek those intellectual virtues which Newman held in such high esteem—and in a way the University could never have provided, for that matter.

3. ENVIRONMENTS AND TECHNOLOGY

In all but the rarest of exceptions, learning as a way of life—to dwell in an environment conducive to improved understanding of the world, rather than a system where we are passed through one grade, one course, one exam after another—has been out of the reach for most people, in most times and most places, for one or another reason, but most typically those reasons have been of

⁸ 1974: *Mißbrauch der Sprache, Mißbrauch der Macht* in the English translation by Lothar Krauth, *Abuse of Language, Abuse of Power*, 17.

an incidental and material nature: there being too few minds adequate as guides to truth, too few copies of the books most fitting to a continually-developing mind, too few *places* strewn too far apart where one could find the kind of community in which the pursuit of these higher goods receives the support it needs. Thus, for most of history in which there has been any concerted effort to developing the life of the mind, the student would go to school or receive a home education until old enough and capable enough for an occupation, wherein “real” contributions to the world, for most people, could be made. Whatever study one could undertake afterwards would either be directly subordinated to career advancement—especially in recent decades—or taken as a pleasurable diversion in one’s “free time”. Little to no credence was given to the belief that study and learning constitute an **integral good** of one’s life as a whole for all but a select few. The development, pursuit, and growth in intellectual virtue was therefore relegated to a class of intellectuals—a class increasingly disconnected from the concerns of the laboring classes, itself divided between white and blue collars.

In a way, this image mirrors—albeit in a distorted fashion—a societal division commonly articulated in the Latin Middle Ages: between those who pray, those who work productively, and those who fight. This distinction, however, while it may at times and in places be a suitable way for ordering society, may obscure the fact that a comparable division is found in *every* human being: having minds and appetites both desirous and spirited alike. That some persons are more suited for focusing their efforts on the life of the mind, others on societally-fruitful production, and others still on labors of the body—this truth remains, but it remains also that in *all* persons, regardless of class (or collar-color), the intellect is both highest and in want of development, *regardless* of the societal structure. To build up culture through a building up of the mind, a growing in the virtues: this seems a worthy goal no matter one’s time, place, or circumstances.

The University, that is, came into being under constraints of time, place, the needs of physical upkeep, residential life, and has suffered the increased cost—financially, psychologically, and teleologically—of attempting to maintain itself under such constraints in recent decades; and not only under the constraints as they were in centuries past, but exacerbated by financial imbalances throughout society and ideological pressures contrary to its mission. Increasingly and accordingly, it has tended towards vocational training and job- or career-specific, and therefore narrow and not at all liberal, education, as what is demanded and sought after in society today. The rise of such instruction—and the fall of the humanities, or, worse, their gross perversion—has not simply been the result of greed, or “modernization”, or “progress”, nor of some collective and arbitrary pivot in social goals, but rather is, not exclusively though primarily, the consequence of paradigmatic shifts in the *environment*.

An environment is constituted not only by the physical things surrounding an animal, but also according to how the animal holds itself toward those objects. How we relate to things constitutes an element of the environment no less essential than the things themselves to which we relate; and the *means* through which those relations are accomplished—our senses, or percepts, our concepts, and our media—play a **reflexive** role as well. In other words, the more we use those means, the greater the effect they have upon us, instilling habits of how we relate to the world through those means; most especially do they alter our habits when we use them *unquestioningly*, without any critical awareness of what those means themselves are or what they do to us, nor *how* they have such consequences.

The predominant media structuring our environment and the habits through which we relate to the world today are the technologies of the internet: that is, the ubiquitously-present and accessible worldwide network of digital devices. We use this network every day—perhaps nearly every waking hour. We rely on it for

news, for business and personal communication, for connection with others of all kinds; for inquiry and discovery of facts and information, for entertainment. It appears on all our screens, through all our devices—extending even into the “internet of things”.

But *what is* the internet? Do we truly know? I do not mean the underlying architecture, physical and digital alike—ports and gateways and IP addresses and fiber optic cables—but rather what the internet *does*. That is, to know *what* anything is entails knowing more than the parts out of which it is made—we must know also its characteristic actions and influences. In the early days of commercial internet availability, it was most immediately a tool for business and especially for business communication, and quickly grew into commerce, personal communication, and the sharing of curiosity; but it took on a dramatic shift with the advent of social media and the smartphone. As self-narration and self-curation took hold through social media platforms—allowing not only for anyone to *use* the internet, but to gain an audience easily and quickly—familiar tendencies of the human psyche found room to grow in the digital age: the seeking of fame (being “followed”), popularity (being “liked”), fortune (“monetizing”), and reputation (being “noted”).

But these tendencies first became so deeply rooted in the human psyche in the first place through their predecessor technologies of the electric age: namely, radio and especially television. They are tendencies of the ephemeral, the fleeting, the passing moment, and most especially the tendencies of **fantasy**: that is, of portraying the unreal as real and the unrealizable ideal as possible, attainable. The arts of self-narration and self-curation consist principally in making one’s experiences *appear* as desired.

This pervasive falsity, however, no longer beguiles us today as readily as it did in the age of the television; for there is no centralized control, no guiding ethos which preserves or excludes from digital presentation. One may find any theory espoused, any belief professed, any lunacy made to sound credible and any credible theory made to sound ludicrous; one may easily learn to deceive and inveigle audiences just as well as anyone else, today—thereby shattering deep belief in the illusions we observe, knowing as readily we do how they are created. In the television age, we all clustered around the narratives of the charismatic and remote personality whom we saw in and heard from our TV sets (but who barely acknowledged us), to hear the same stories and see the same images, and marvel at what we were told. But this centralized authoritative voice has been abandoned, its authority rejected, and, as the digital nomads wander across the paths of cyberspace, new ideas and habits accrue, and everyone else seems all the stranger and—for the moment—all the more threatening. Digital tribes form; squabble with each other; squabble within themselves; dissolve; re-form anew and start the process all over again, speeding erratically, chaotically, down different pathways of the information superhighway. In the words of the Korean-German philosopher Byung-Chul Han, “The mass of information produces no truth. The more information is set free, the more difficult it proves to survey the world. Hyperinformation and hypercommunication bring no light into darkness”⁹ and “After a certain point, information ceases to be informative. It becomes deformative. Likewise, communication stops being communicative; henceforth, it is only cumulative.”¹⁰

⁹ Han 2012: *Transparenzgesellschaft* in the English translation by Erik Butler, *The Transparency Society*, 41.

¹⁰ Han 2013: *Im Schwarm. Ansichten des Digitalen* in the English translation by Erik Butler, *In the Swarm: Digital Prospects*, 61.

Thus, today we find little in the way of communal reality on the internet—what there is being often incidental and short-lived, grounded as it is not in any truly *relational* good, but the incidental alignment of relations with subjective desires and opinions.

Is this our best digital life? Is this the best that we can do with the internet?

No. We have fallen into this way of living online because it is the way which has been placed before us and we, unthinkingly, have walked along it without looking about ourselves to see which other way we might go; or, as it turns out, where we might **stay**. That is, we are all online running after... something: followers, likes, opportunities, theories, ideas, groups, attention; from one page to another, one tweet to the next, endlessly scrolling after—something. We seek some sign that will reveal to us an identity for ourselves, calling out for something in which we can find *meaning* but hearing only an empty echo. We have followed and expanded and individualized the centralizing tendencies of television into the digital age—flipping through channels, waiting for the next episode, the next best fantasy, the next best illusion of meaningful engagement—without yet realizing what the digital itself is, what it is doing to us, and what we should or could be doing with it.

For all our technologies, and especially those ordered directly to interpersonal communication, affect not only the mediation of our actions, but, further, the mediation of our **habits**: that is, the typical attunement of our psychological faculties towards objects, through which environments are constituted. This habitual affectation results in a culture becoming more *visual* or *auditory*, more *recollective*-oriented or more *fantasy*-oriented, more *intellectual* or more *carneal*—and typically, in a complex relationship between what belongs primarily to **sense**,

to **perception**, to **intellection**, and to the **whole human person** as constituted through these varied cognitive faculties.

The transition from one dominant technology to the next always results in psychological and subsequently sociological upheaval, as the medium painfully realigns the habitual orientations of the faculties. The transition from the *televisual age* to the *digital age* follows this same pattern. While there is a continuum underlying both the televisual and the digital (namely, extension of our awareness through electricity and its effects to objects we cannot grasp naturally), every transition from one form of technological life to another occurs only through the brute force of the irrupting technology. The habitual patterns ensuing upon television are currently being disrupted—with a rapid and painful escalation—by those the digital nature insists we form.

That is, the televisual age ushered in what Marshall McLuhan famously named “the Global Village” (which he later renamed “the Global Theater”): a notion that, with the usual obtuseness of the increasingly technocratic 20th century, was misunderstood to signify a growing singular ethos of the world wherein we would all soon be happily pursuing the same common goals in life; that with the commonality of information would come a commonality of purpose. But:¹¹

the village—whether global or provincial, ancient or modern—is not a preserver of precise truth, but of legend, of myth, of story and narrative made memorable precisely because it is larger than life. We tend, in a village, towards fantasy. We tend, in an industrial village which worships the idol of control, towards a comprehensively planned-out fantasy of unlimited self-actualization, of self-set

¹¹ Kemple 5 February 2019b: “Leaving the Global Village” at *Lapsus Lima* <<http://www.lapsuslima.com/leaving-the-global-village/>>.

destiny. We tend, in an electric industrial village worshipping the idol of self-supremacy, towards delusion. This is the syntax of our society.

The only important commonality of purpose which developed, therefore, was the endless drive on to the next thing: the next news clip, the next story, the next scandal, sensation, drama, comedy; to let fade what had occurred so that we could move onto the next, the new, the different, the exciting, the greater and bigger fantasy, the promise that the next delusion would deliver what the most-recent—already being forgotten—had failed to provide. The Global Village did not make us one happy family, but it did make us one ignorant populace—ignorant of all but the stories told to us by our village elders: the news anchors, the reporters, the experts and elites, all those who routinely denounced the validity of arguments from authority from their own authoritative platforms and positions. It made us comfortable in this ignorance, blanketed under the promise that others knew well enough that we did not need to know much of anything. Who needs to have contact himself with wisdom, when one can always tune in to the words of the televisual Wiseman?

Digital technology—irrupting into the televisual age at the speed of seldom-checked capitalism—has caused a mass diaspora from the Global Village. We no longer hear in common the same news, the same stories, the same theories, the same ideas, the same words issued from the same Wiseman. There is too much news, too many stories, too many theories, too many ideas, too many claiming the mantle of wisdom. We are drowning in a flood of information, much of it true, much of it false, and of whatever we can seize, realized increasingly—as we watch the unseized torrent rushing by—as incomplete, realized as belonging to a narrative we do not fully know, and, often, told by an unknown narrator.

We thus no longer have authorities and experts in whom we trust (few of whom were worthy of trust in the first place, when we did have trust in them), but hear instead no fewer than a thousand different voices saying, “Follow me: I know the way!” But these nomadic leaders of the diasporic former villagers know far less than they claim, and sooner or later, all seem to become lost in the wilderness, despite their asseverations of continued progress, or their tired declarations that this unpromising landscape is where they intended to arrive after all, or that they have a plan, a trajectory, a purpose towards which their works are building. The visions they proclaim are only new fantasies; just as vapid and illusory as the old.

But while the internet has opened avenues previously kept under tight lock and key in the televisual age, the habit of rushing through them, following our deep habits of fantasy down the new paths and out into the wilderness, has led us to miss what *else* the internet and its underlying architecture of digital technology together allow and, even more fundamentally, **encourage** by their very nature: namely, the archival retention and categorization of all the information that has been made available. So attuned are we to the televisual way of being that we hardly even know where to begin in answering the question of how to live digitally.

We are not here to say we have all the answers, and certainly not to promise a *solution*. But we had an idea that appears worth pursuing. The state of culture today is comparable to the days following the dissolution of the Roman Empire (only on a timeline where centuries are compressed into years or even months). The central culturizing influence—the television—has lost its authority, and bits and pieces of what once was have been carved up and distributed among the various tribes, who fight over their claims to authenticity and ownership of beliefs. What withstood this chaos and not only preserved Western culture but grew its learning in the centuries following the Empire’s fragmentation was the monastery.

The monasteries—most famously those of Ireland—sprung up as bastions of holiness and stability in a darkening world; a world where order and safety collapsed in the absence of Roman discipline. In our day of ideological and cultural but not (yet, at least) societal collapse, we need something similar and different; for we are not in a society where the conditions for intellectual flourishing stand far off, but rather—*especially* given our digital technologies today—are literally at our fingertips. Truth in the fifth and sixth centuries AD was threatened by the ubiquitous loss of societal infrastructure; in the twenty-first century, it is threatened by the obfuscation of unrestrained “information”, by atrophied abilities of interpretation, by a new scientism, and by the worst habits of humankind exerting a ubiquitous influence. Our ideological situation is as fragmented as the world after the fall of Rome; but our intellectual situation is much more akin to that of Athens in the time of Plato and Aristotle. That is, we lack a clear perception of truth not because it is obscured by the darkness of a renewed primeval state, but rather by the rainbow-colored clouds of sophistry and licentiousness.

The present state of technologically-mediated life, therefore, is one of pervasive chaos: that is, not only in the “content” but much more so in the psyche; chaos not only in the world, but much more deeply in the faculties of the human soul. We have not yet abandoned the fantasy-attuned habits of the televisual age—to the contrary, we have amplified them a thousandfold—nor have we yet embraced the retentive and categorical habits of the digital, but rather have done our best to forget and confuse all we encounter. That these latter habits will develop seems inevitable, so long as the technology remains long enough in place—sooner or later, though with no guarantee that they will then be directed virtuously—but our concern is with the *here* and *now*; with the lives of the current generation. How can *we* live good digital lives?

That is to say, we have an opportunity to become conscious of our habits of fantasy and, becoming conscious of them, shed them; to form new, better habits: habits of recollection, habits of categorization, habits attuned to gaining knowledge and growing in understanding; habits of a philosophical nature which will be necessary to ensuring that the digital life we live *is* a good one—that is, most of all, habits of living inquisitively.

4. THE LYCEUM INSTITUTE

Thus, the idea was born for the Lyceum Institute: an online environment wherein the members could collectively, voluntarily, and, under the guidance of those who have dedicated their lives to learning, pursue the formation and development of better habits, especially habits of careful and adept thinking, and thereby contribute to not just the preservation of truth, but its strengthening. The Institute is not a program, a course, a certification process, not a substitute for the University, nor simply a platform on which to find content for passive consumption. Rather, it is a community that fosters the life of the mind: a digital environment wherein everything is ordered towards the development of perfective human habits, rather than deviant ones: habits of humility, generosity, insightful interpretation, willingness to hear, ardor for the truth and deepening one's understanding, security in forming one's beliefs, contentment, and worldly detachment. The Institute is an enclave for thinking, differentiated from the world “outside” not by viewing it through a lens of gnosticism, but by instilling and maintaining a dispassionate devotion to the truth. It is where one may go after having observed the chaos, the disorder, the blind ideological adherence, and the sophisticated machinations of the wider “intellectual” world, to learn, study, think, and most of all converse—not merely exchange information—with others following a common path, forming a union in the mutually-aided pursuit of truth.

We seek the improvement of individual understanding realized through communal effort in the fostering of philosophical habit and thereby the development of **intellectual virtue**.

This end stands not as one of *appearing* intelligent—the satisfaction of curiosity for the dilettante or cultural sophisticate—but an integral good of human life and a principal way in which the human grows in being. For what *is* good in life? What makes for a good way of being human—not only with respect to any final end, beyond this life, but *within* it? Can we truly live well without an answer to this question? As Aristotle writes:¹²

If, therefore, there is some end of our actions that we wish for on account of itself, the rest being things we wish for on account of this end, and if we do not choose all things on account of something else—for in this way the process will go on infinitely such that the longing involved is empty and pointless—clearly this would be the good, that is, the best. And with a view to our life, then, is not the knowledge of this good of great weight, and would we not, like archers in possession of a target, better hit on what is needed?

In his *Treatise on Happiness*, Saint Thomas Aquinas—among the greatest thinkers in the Aristotelian tradition, if not *the* greatest thinker—claims that, in whatever happiness consists, it is obtained through an operation of the intellect and delighted in through the operation of the will,¹³ and that achievements of our speculative intellect constitute a certain albeit imperfect degree of happiness in this life.¹⁴

¹² c.335/34BC: *Ἠθικὰ Νικομάχεια* in the English translation by Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins, *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, I.2, 1094a 18-25.

¹³ 1269-70: *ST* Ia-IIae, q.3, a.4.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, a.5-6.

For certainly, we cannot truly possess *any* good unless it is possessed in accordance with the truth about that good, and not merely according to appearances.¹⁵ To possess the good according to the truth about it requires a training of the mind, whereby we guard ourselves not only against the mendacious actors of the world, but learn to defend the coherent reality of our experiences. Here we benefit especially from the virtue of intellectual insight—which Aristotle called νόσς (*nous*) and which seems related to abductive inference (as C.S. Peirce describes it)—that is, the virtue of the mind whereby we grasp the *intelligible* in and through the perceptual, where we grasp some unchanging truth.¹⁶ It is to leave the Cave and emerge into the Light: an experience frightening but also, for those with the courage to open their eyes, a moment that inspires wonder.

Penetrating beyond the veil of mere appearances, whatever true joy we might take in that wonder, however, is only the beginning of our intellectual journey. For, although the act of insight comes like a flash, we may nevertheless dispose ourselves well for its happening, by sharpening our habits of perceptual observation and our probative questioning of the things perceived. As we hone these acts of the mind, we not only discover the intelligibility of phenomena—their meaningfulness beyond appearance—but seek an understanding, a genuine **knowledge**, of those realities. This knowledge is built through the further discovery of those phenomena’s causes: the **what** and **how**, the **by whom** and **through what means**, the **from out of what** and **towards what end** or **why**, the **in-accordance with**, and so on.

¹⁵ Cf. Karol Wojtyła 1979: *The Acting Person*, 141–42.

¹⁶ Cf. Aristotle c.335/34BC: *Ἠθικὰ Νικομάχεια* (*Nicomachean Ethics*) 1140b 30–1141a 8, and Peirce 1903: “Pragmatism as the Logic of Abduction” in *EP2*: 226–41.

Discovering the answers to these questions of causality invariably reorients us to the objects themselves, seeing them more clearly in the light of the truths that govern their being and thus discovering the *true* good in their relations to ourselves, to other things, and in their own being. This bettered perception results in an extension, we might say, of our speculative knowledge to practical consequences, elevating our relations to the world beyond the merely-reactive. This self-possession in action through knowledge prevents the imperatives of the world from gaining authority over the soul.

We thereby free ourselves from the dictates of a culture seldom seeking that which is best *for* us and rather only that which it may gain *from* us—no matter the length or depth of suffering we might therein endure, perhaps even a suffering unrealized by ourselves or those who impose it upon us. Instead, we discover the **principles** by which a truly good human life ought to be lived; and, indeed, even principles governing for *all* reality, ourselves and the rest of the universe as well—principles we grasp only inchoately and always incompletely, but really, truly, and fruitfully nonetheless. As St. Thomas Aquinas tells us, the least grasp of the greater truths accessible to our minds—those belonging to the heights of metaphysics—far exceeds even the most comprehensive understanding of the things below.

Should we not all seek such truths, even if all we ever achieve is but a glimpse? They have too long been out of reach for many—not because of inherent intellectual defect, but because time and opportunity enough have not been provided.

Digital life, as chaotic and disordered as it appears in the channels of social media, allows for unique educational opportunity: a historically singular medium that enables not only encounter with the perennial tradition, but constant revitalization

of that tradition as *living*. For, in order that someone truly *learn*, more is needed than merely reading books or blogs or articles: education always being a matter of a certain *training*, which entails not only reading or passive consumption of information, but the interpretative processing of that which is received and—perhaps most importantly of all—a critical conversation with others through which that interpretation may be refined and improved. No mind lives and thrives all on its own, and while reading the works of great writers is an encounter with their minds, it is one-directional only. Something more is needed—other persons, who bring not only their own minds, but all the minds they have read, all the minds they have encountered, in some way to your own. These are brought not merely as a message to be received—a monologue to be delivered—but to be lived through in conversation, in unpredictable and vital dialogue. We attain an exponential increase of intellectual exposure through involvement in a community; we gain **conversance**: a knowledge and awareness which goes beyond the superficialities of informational accumulation by penetrating to the causes which explain reality.

In other words, what Newman conceived to be the business of the University, I conceive to be that of the Lyceum Institute—only, with a broader potential reach and an enduring, recurring accessibility. By taking advantage of the opportunities provided through the digital technological medium, the Lyceum is growing into a community of persons committed to the collaborative pursuit of intellectual, discriminating, reflective habits, and to living a more philosophically-rich life in all the things we do. Most especially can we thereby pursue intellectual virtue not as a vague or ethereal loftiness, but rather by which is meant, following the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition, a specific variety of operations in which our thinking is bent towards the truth:

First, there is the virtue of **insight**. We may develop this virtue through learning, first, how to direct our perceptual awareness of the world—forming good perceptual habits—and on the basis of that sharpened perceptual attunement, learn to ask good questions.

Second, there are the **habits of knowledge**. That is, knowledge is not a possession, but a way of holding oneself towards the intelligible truths of the world; specifically, holding oneself towards them by a grasp of their causes, and therefore an understanding of their constitution.

Third, we encourage the virtue of **prudence** through a common support in discerning the extension of speculative knowledge into the practical, into good action.

Fourth, we train and improve ourselves continually in mastery of the **arts** of language and the word, bettering our understanding of communication both as received and given, with an eye towards understanding especially the digital environment we all today inhabit.

Fifth, and finally, while no human being can either possess nor give to another any **wisdom**, we may nevertheless love and pursue that wisdom to our continued benefit—that discovery and understanding of principles by which all things are governed—and it is to this end, the love of wisdom, that the Lyceum Institute is ordered in all its actions.

The Lyceum Institute stands open to all, even if it prove difficult for many: graduate and undergraduate students, professors, clergy, the philosophically-seeking general public—regardless of profession or background—and any others who seek an ennobled intellectual and digital life. It is our belief that “experts” and “novices” in the intellectual life profit alike from the community of common purpose—for the truly wise benefit as much if not more in hearing well the

questions of the beginner than in the discourses of the equally learned—and therefore we seek mutual support of one another in the pursuit of bettered habits.

4.1. INQUIRERE, ORDINARE, MEMORARE

The pursuit of these bettered habits is enshrined in the core principles to which all members are exhorted in the three parts of the Institute Motto: *Inquirere, Ordinare, Memorare* – to Inquire, to Order, and to Remember.

Why these three actions as principles?

The Lyceum Institute, constituted as an environment through digital technology, is adapted to fit and fructify the habits enabled by the nature of networked digital technology—which, at its core, is *archival*. That is, the very nature of digital architecture is to receive and retain bits of information that can represent nearly anything. Anything done online can be archived: captured in an arrangement of data and saved for posterity for ready and repeated access; it thus extends our *memorative* habits and capacities, if we employ the technology *and* our faculties properly. Where prior electric technological environments, such as radio and television, emphasized the ephemeral and directed our mental habits toward the continually new, the retentive capacities of the ever-expanding digital archive will lead us continually towards recalling what has been said and thinking about what has been done—which are retained indefinitely in archives to which we may always find access.

But consequently, for this archivality to be rightly leveraged, digital technology demands a habit of categorical consideration—a habit of *ordering*: as any good archive must be well-ordered, and approached with an ordered mind, for it to be used properly. What good is retention if we cannot navigate that which has been retained? Thus, we may retain all things in digital representations, but we must

also discern *what* they are to know best *how* we may organize those retained representations and thereby search through them, to find that for which we are looking.

Furthermore, this demands of us an improved capacity for *questioning*; that is, no quantity of archived information, no matter how well it is organized, can tell us what we need to know if we do not even know how to ask the right questions. Moreover, what to do with that information requires not simply the “right” question, but a habit of knowing how to formulate those questions and pursue the answers: of knowing what to ask, and when, and in what manner it is to be asked. Questioning is itself a habit in want of practice, and the ability to formulate good questions an art.

Thus, we inquire, and having inquired, we order our discoveries, and having ordered our discoveries, seek their retention and recollection through a technological extension of ourselves. The inquisitive habit does not terminate in this recollective practice, however; for the act of *memorare* allows us to make better, future inquiries. We are better enabled to question, that is, on the basis of truths already known, guided by the searches of the past.

But underlying and motivating all three of these actions is the most indispensable of traits: an alacrity to *know*, to *learn*. As the great twelfth-century master of the arts, Hugh of St. Victor writes:¹⁷

Eagerness to inquire relates to practice and in it the student needs encouragement rather than instruction. Whoever wishes to inspect earnestly what the ancients in their love of wisdom have handed down to us, and how deserving of posterity's remembrance are the monuments which they left of their virtue, will see how inferior

¹⁷ Hugh of Saint Victor c.1130: *Didascalicon* in the English translation by Jerome Taylor, 97.

his own earnestness is to theirs. Some of them scorned honors, others cast aside riches, others rejoiced in injuries received, others despised hardships, and still others, deserting the meeting places of men for the farthest withdrawn spots and secret haunts of solitude, gave themselves over to philosophy alone, that they might have greater freedom for undisturbed contemplation insofar as they subjected their minds to none of the desires which usually obstruct the path of virtue.

The shift to a digital paradigm cannot but cause consternation in the attempt to develop good intellectual habits. It is much easier to live thoughtfully when surrounded by other persons doing the same: this, indeed, is why many remain attached to the University, either in place or in nostalgia, as the place wherein the joy of learning was discovered and fructified. But there are many today with the eagerness to inquire, to learn, who cannot afford to give “themselves over to philosophy alone”, and who, in this chaotic world of informational and disinformational chaos, *need* an environment where the pursuit of wisdom stands as the common and uniting goal—an environment that *encourages* that natural desire for knowledge and fosters the habits suitable for its development.

4.2. LIFELONG HABITS OF LEARNING

These habits—the habits that nourish intellectual virtue in the digital environment—are not suited principally for completing a course of study or attaining a certification, but for the fulfillment of our natural desire to know: a fulfillment that expands our desires even as it satisfies them.

That is, it is a popular but true adage that the more one knows, the more one becomes aware of how much one does *not* know—which is to say, how much more one has yet to learn—despite which we allow ourselves but a fragment of our lives to be spent in formal educational pursuits. The standard course for a bachelor’s degree of arts takes four years; a master’s, two; and a doctorate between three and six. Yet the majority of persons do not gain advanced degrees; certainly

not in the philosophical sciences—here meaning literature, history, philosophy, and theology—and what exposure most persons have to a liberal education likely comes either from a handful of classes or from outside one’s formal college education altogether. Decreasingly do the established institutions of higher learning care to foster a love of learning—especially if that love comes with certain pains of undoing *bad* habits—treating the student instead like a consumer.

Many who *do* gain an advanced degree continue immersion in the world of academia—though not all—but for a relatively large percentage who do continue this immersion, they find themselves far-flung, taking jobs wherever they are offered, often on short-term contracts and requiring a continued communal rootlessness, far from good research libraries and communities which support the life of learning. Students are reluctant; colleagues are jaded; and administrators actively discourage straying outside the bounds of an approved curriculum (itself ever more disconnected from reality) or using more than a pittance for travel and lodging in attending conferences or otherwise promoting a culture of extra-curricular learned discourse.

Even for those whose lives continue in an academic trajectory after their undergraduate education, that is, insufficient support is given for the fructification of the intellectual life. We academics become ever-more aware of how little we know but are typically given less and less means to study well and thoughtfully those things of which we know ourselves to be ignorant.¹⁸ Does a doctor of philosophy truly know enough never to need some further education that can only

¹⁸ Except in rare and difficult to obtain situations: being appointed, that is, to course-load reduced tenured positions and most especially those endowed for research—but even these are not guaranteed to allow one true expansion of the mind, as often there are expectations of increased publication.

be provided by another person? Are we “beyond” the need for further classes and seminars? Do papers heard at conferences once or twice a year, with subsequent ten-to-twenty minute question and answer sessions suffice to satisfy the innate desire to grow in knowledge? Do we not need to know better what is going on in disciplines other than our own—most especially if we are seeking wisdom?

In the *Reconocimientos* (Acknowledgements) to his massive philosophical history told from the perspective of semiotics, *Four Ages of Understanding*—a work written in a few weeks but revised and expanded over years—John Deely wrote the following:¹⁹

When you live on the fringes, such a task [writing and revising a scholarly book on the whole history of philosophy] is not easy, for it requires not merely the assistance of a research library (there is no other kind of library in fact; only good and inferior research libraries), but of a research library so excellent that it does not even exist in one place. Not even the legendary library of Alexandria, had it survived intact, would have been sufficient.

Deely goes on to acknowledge those whose efforts aided him in the completion of the work—not only with accessing and utilizing the capacities of literal research libraries, such as interlibrary loans, but with their own knowledge, their own corrections, suggestions, and objections. The point should be well-noted—at the time of this writing—some two-plus decades later: namely, that if we want to understand anything well, to grasp it comprehensively, we need always more resources than we have. More books. More papers. More thoughts. More eyes. More attention, more focus, more determination, and more discussion: “the conversation of all is a series of lectures to each”. We cannot do much of anything at all that is worth doing if we attempt doing it alone. Yet we have a far greater

¹⁹ 1998: “Reconocimientos” in *Four Ages of Understanding*, xxvii.

technological capacity for collaboration and mutual support today, no matter to which fringes we have been thrown, than was had even a single decade ago—let alone two, or twenty.

Thus, the Lyceum Institute aims to be a perennial source for those who would grow in knowledge and understanding, regardless of background, station in life, geographical location, professional circumstances, or stage of career: to allow all an endless pursuit of learning and research while remaining thoughtfully attuned to the present environment and how it influences our lives. At the basis of our study is attention upon *language*. This attention focuses on language as not only the principal instrument by which we communicate with others, but also an integral element which profoundly shapes the structure of our thinking. Well-developed linguistic ability—achieved principally through a rigorous and continual revisitation of the classical Trivium that discerns not only its historical roots but its fittingness to the digital environment of today—serves as a foundation for all the intellectual virtues we pursue. Thus, we recurrently ground our efforts at understanding in the arts of *grammar*, *logic*, and *rhetoric*.

Correlatively, we pursue a dynamic understanding of language through a multiplicity of its instances, studying not only English but seeking familiarity and fluency with Latin—from classical through medieval and beyond—as well as Attic Greek, German, French, and more. We hold that it is through linguistic means that we *model* our shared understanding of the world and therefore conversance with that linguistic signification itself functions pivotally for the good human life. We can perceive and also communicate better when we understand the differences between, say, the ablatives of separation and source, or the uses of ampliation and diminution—especially when we see such manifestations of grammatical and rhetorical force across a plurality of languages.

Further, we grow our linguistically-attuned thinking through structured philosophical inquiries, undertaking specific questions of perennial importance: questions about the soul; about science, the sign, knowledge, and the metaphysical; about good and evil, politics and society, culture and civilization; about faith, reason, their relationship to one another, and about God. These inquiries spill over into every aspect of the Lyceum, but are principally conducted across concentrated 8-week seminars and under the guidance of those who have dedicated their lives to the study of philosophy—doctors educated in the perennial tradition and deeply conversant with the topics and authors who have contributed best to our own development of understanding. Each seminar aims at drawing its participants into a contemplative, reflective, insightful, and collaborative questioning.

By recurring to and therefore consistently improving these habits of linguistic mastery and philosophical inquiry, we find the whole range of intellectual life opened to us; and thus, throughout our shared digital community we engage in discussion of history, economics, literature, and theology—wars and poetry, the apophatic and the supereminent, the epic and the trochee, subsidiarity and capital—indeed, all the things that may have an effect on human life may be touched upon or even plumbed deeply in our conversations. This openness to discovery and inquiry, engaged in continual, thoughtful, respectful discussion with one another fructifies the habit of learning, not as a matter of utility but of proper human flourishing. If the pursuit of wisdom is an integral part of the good human life, it must, of course, be something to which we have frequent recourse: “For one swallow does not make a spring, nor does one day. And in this way, one day or a short time does not make someone blessed and happy, either.”²⁰ Thus, the

²⁰ c.335/34BC: *Ἠθικὰ Νικομάχεια* (*Nicomachean Ethics*), 1098a 18-19.

Lyceum encourages all its members to return again and again to the questions and thinkers who illuminate for us the way towards the truth as a habit of life itself.

4.3. MISSION AND VISION

In accordance with the aforesaid, the Lyceum Institute adopts and pledges to uphold the following mission statement:

The Lyceum Institute provides a digital environment dedicated to fostering the philosophical habit—of questioning the truth of things and the good of life—in all its members, as we collectively pursue the never-ending education of a truly mind-liberating nature. Much of education depends upon the atmosphere in which we immerse ourselves, and, in the twenty-first century, we all inhabit a digital atmosphere. The Lyceum Institute seeks a continual, communal, and thoughtful ennobling of that atmosphere.

To ennoble our atmosphere, we seek three qualities in faculty and members alike: humility before, the desire to discover, and ardent love for the truth.

This realization of our mission may alter in shape, adapt to new means, or follow different avenues; it may take years, decades, or perhaps even centuries. But the love of wisdom stands always outside movements measured in time.

RELATED ESSAYS

OUR PHILOSOPHY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

FROM ANTIQUITY TO THE 21ST CENTURY

DANIEL WAGNER
FACULTY FELLOW

Guiding principles for the method of teaching philosophy and for understanding the relationship between teacher and student at the Lyceum Institute are expressed by Plato (427–347BC) in the *Meno*. To the major question of the dialogue, “is virtue teachable?” Plato’s Socrates gives the nuanced answer: “*yes and no*.” A careful examination of intellectual virtue (and all the virtues, for that matter), shows that virtue is complex: that in one sense it is teachable, but in another equally important sense it is not teachable. To the extent that virtue is a form of *knowledge* that can be possessed and expressed by a teacher, it is teachable: its

meaning can be conveyed by one who knows it to a student. To the extent, however, that virtue is a *practice* that must be actively and freely chosen from within, and to the extent that intellectual virtue requires that the individual seek to “see” with the mind’s eye for himself, as it were, it is not teachable. Of course—and as the figure of Alcibiades teaches us at the end of another Platonic dialogue, the *Symposium*—knowing that the intellectual life is the good and the best life, and even wanting it as such, is not the same as, nor is it sufficient for, choosing to live such a life. To choose to practice and to live the intellectual life is not merely to be passively formed by a teacher, it is to actively form one’s self in the truth and the good.

At the Lyceum Institute, professor and student are bonded by their common and natural desire to satisfy wonder in the virtuous pursuit and acquisition of knowledge. The professor has acquired the highest level of historical-textual and systematic training, so that he can obtain the just end and responsibility of his office: to disclose the order of reason and the truth in terms of the philosophical material being studied and in terms of reality itself, and to refute error. This is, as St. Thomas Aquinas teaches us in the opening chapter of *Summa Contra Gentiles*, the purpose of the office of the philosopher. Of course, pedagogically speaking, the professor also provides helpful mechanisms that allow the student the opportunity to choose to take on the intellectual virtue. But again, the student, in order to obtain the just end and responsibility of *his* office, must freely choose to engage in the activity of acquiring the order of reason, knowing the material being studied and reality itself, and refuting error. At the Lyceum Institute, we seek to fulfill these reciprocal and complimentary ends and responsibilities in humility and with courage, obtaining the good and perfection of the teacher-student relation in dialectic.

In the course of Plato's dialogue, it becomes apparent that Meno lacks virtue. He does not seek to satisfy wonder in the humble pursuit of the truth, nor does he choose to take on the methodical use of reason that Socrates clearly and emphatically expresses to him. As with Sophists like Gorgias—whom Meno admires—he wishes to use the power of speech to display himself as an authority, speaking as a fearless and great man to his audience so that he might receive honor and praise and manipulate for his own material benefit. He has memorized accounts spoken by those who impress him in manner and style, but he has not thought critically about the accounts—he has not thought them for himself or understood them so he cannot see their limitations, errors, and incoherence. Consequently, his accounts do not withstand the rational and critical *ἐλεγχος* (*elenchus*) of Socrates—that is, the critical argumentative method of questioning often called the “Socratic method”—who shows him with reason that, truly, he does not know what virtue is so that he could not, in principle, answer as to whether or not it is teachable. Being shown his own ignorance, in his pride, lacking the humility to be taught and the courage to proceed where he has uncertainty, Meno falsely accuses Socrates of harming him and he employs an *ἐριστικός λόγος* (*eristikos logos*) or an eristic attack on the person of Socrates contrary to reason and akin to physical violence. Lacking even basic self-knowledge of the action of his own speech, he is unaware of contradicting himself. In the end, he appears to have remained intellectually in the place that he began, without learning, obtaining knowledge and intellectual virtue, and he is even unaware that his own slave has put him to shame by humbly and courageously taking on and displaying true intellectual virtue in his own dialogue with Socrates.

One way of thinking about the downside of contemporary digital information and communication—especially media and communication on TV and the internet—is that often it acts as a disordered teacher helping to form persons in

the mold of Meno. In this shadowy place cloaked in the light of dopamine producing pixels, we are often malformed without understanding or practicing rational inquiry. Google thinks for us: not merely translating, defining, or calculating, but telling us in our searches what is true, what is good, and what is beautiful without even the pretense of proper logical form and evidence. Knowing what he wants (or believing that he knows), contemporary man excludes the possibility for real Socratic dialectic, only visiting sites and imbibing media that are “safe” because they restate and reinforce his own view—they reveal no error and fault of his own, nor do they demand change and revision of lifestyle. In fact, “teacher” and “student,” in this relation, are not engaged in rational-discourse (λόγος/*logos*), but as using words to justify what they already want and excluding all rational challenge they are μῖσόλογοι (*misologoi*) or haters-of-rational-discourse (as named in the *Phaedo*). In spite of the fact that the digital age has made information, dialogue, and learning more accessible for so many, many remain alone in echo chambers of stagnant intellectual self-affirmation. Where Socratic challenge does arise in comment sections or the blogosphere, pride and cowardice abound in the misuse and abuse of language, reason, and the person, with eristic and the cancelling and muting of any word suggesting that there might be a better course in life. Algorithms aimed at holding gazes for financial gain mirror previously expressed interests to corral off users from all rational opposition and create the false sense that justificatory evidence for their own frameworks of desire somehow arises organically in the unending universe of digital information. The transmission of information in these realms is not dialectically ordered to truth, the good, and the refutation of error, but to self-aggrandizement—it is the antithesis of philosophy as the pursuit of truth inspired by wonder.

The Lyceum Institute uses digital technology in a responsible and fitting manner in order to connect teacher and student in a relation of rational discourse and carry on the perennial tradition of Socratic dialogue in the pursuit of knowledge. This is education in the true sense of liberal arts, which alone we seek freely and not for utilitarian purposes and which alone set us free to obtain the highest perfection of our rational faculties. Now, perhaps more than at any time in the past, there is a need for clear and logically coherent thinking and expression, and for the study and articulation of realist philosophy treating the issues most important to human existence. The Lyceum Institute seeks to fulfill this need, bringing together from across the world those who would express the virtue of wisdom with those who would freely choose to form it as a virtue in dialogue to the point that students become teachers and teachers students.

EDUCATION, CULTURE, AND THE COMMON GOOD

PURPOSE AND RELATION

FRANCISCO PLAZA
FACULTY FELLOW

As education in the Western world today emphasizes groundless subjectivity in the humanities, and brute utility in the sciences, it seems to us that the very meaning of education itself has been lost. This, however, is a natural result of the modern world's crisis of meaning with regard to the human person. In our hypermodern, "postmodern" state, we have lost the ability to define what the human good is, let alone what human nature is itself. As we no longer have a common answer to such questions, it has been left to the individual to determine "their truth" (as distinguished from "the truth," simply speaking). In reality, this only signifies that there is no real truth, in the traditional sense, and that there is

only individual opinion, itself based on arbitrary personal preference or social influence.

Hence, modern education can only offer two paths: either students are trained to perform a particular task, or if they pursue the traditional liberal arts, they are shown various modern ideologies with the goal that this will enable them to discover their own answers, which remain unique and exclusive to themselves as individuals. The former path of utility, however, is given priority over the latter, as the value of liberal arts with its vestigial promises of virtue and fulfillment are only valued by their perceived utility in the world. Arguably, this explains in part why the specific content of the liberal arts is secondary to “critical thinking skills,” for example. Thus, utility stands as the only common aim in education, being defined in a strictly material sense by its outcomes. There remains, however, a genuine need in the human soul for meaning. As intellectual beings, it is part of our nature itself to seek knowledge for its own sake.

Utility is also important, of course, as human beings are also corporeal beings, but we must stress against the prevailing culture that the human good extends beyond the material. As Jacques Maritain wrote:²¹

The utilitarian aspect of education—which enables the youth to get a job and make a living—must surely not be disregarded, for the children of man are not made for aristocratic leisure. But this practical aim is best provided by the general human capacities developed. And the ulterior specialized training which may be required must never imperil the essential aim of education.

Ironically, those who seek only a utilitarian end to education end up actually falling short of this goal in contrast with those who seek a classical, liberal education. Such students tend to be better equipped to attain specialized knowledge later, and will actually surpass those students who, having been

²¹ Maritain 1943: *Education at the Crossroads*, 10.

deprived of a truly liberal education, can only attain knowledge in a chaotic, and incomplete, fashion.²² This is a tangential point, however, as we will argue that the true aim of education lies not in a utilitarian outcome, but in the student himself.²³ Rather than seeing students as a “means” (i.e., teaching them how to be useful in a particular way), the true educator must see the student as a person, and see his development and intrinsic worth as a person as the purpose of his education.²⁴

We would suspect, however, that this critique against contemporary education is not particularly shocking at this point. As the aims of education have shifted in the way we have described, the effects have made themselves far more evident to us in time, as confusion seems all the more ubiquitous in the Western world, and only seems to be growing at a quicker pace. Originally, the modern focus on utility promised an end to philosophical quibbles by reorienting man’s attention instead to merely bettering his condition in the world through material improvement. Instead, the very opposite has taken place, as previously noncontroversial matters (such as what constitutes a “male” or “female”) have

²² Maritain 1930-67: *The Education of Man*, 97: “A universal knowledge which is not unified and integrated according to a firmly recognized hierarchy of values is not universal knowledge, but scattered and chaotic knowledge.”

²³ Maritain 1943: *Education at the Crossroads*, 14-15: “It is obvious that man’s education must be concerned with the social group and prepare him to play his part in it. Shaping man to lead a normal, useful, and cooperative life in the community, or guiding the development of the human person in the social sphere, awakening and strengthening both his sense of freedom and his sense of obligation and responsibility, is an essential aim. But it is not the primary, it is the secondary essential aim. The ultimate end of education concerns the human person in his personal life and spiritual progress, not in his relationship to the social environment.”

²⁴ Maritain 1943: *Education at the Crossroads*, 10: “[The purpose of education] is to guide man in the evolving dynamism through which he shapes himself as a human person—armed with knowledge, strength of judgment, and moral virtues—while at the same time conveying to him the spiritual heritage of the nation and the civilization in which he is involved, and preserving in this way the century-old achievements of generations.”

now become contested and convoluted. The most tragic consequence of all this discord, however, is an ever-growing feeling of alienation as men lead disordered lives without the guidance of a real education that would set them free (as the term “liberal arts” would suggest).

Education cannot proceed without a genuine sense of truth itself. It should also be understood that all theories of education must rest first upon a theory of human nature and the human good, as this will in turn determine how we view a proper education.²⁵ Hence, the philosophical questions that those who sought utility endeavored to avoid are inescapable, as every theory of education must account in one form or another for the perennial truths of human existence, for example: What is the meaning and purpose of human life? What is the source of our existence? What is truth and how do we come into contact with it? What is morally right and wrong? How do we live a good life? What is the best way to live with others? Regardless of one’s vocation, these questions are unavoidable. Even the utilitarian model of education which sought to avoid such questions provided its own response by way of its silence, namely, that such questions cannot be answered.

Traditionally, these questions fall under the study of the humanities (i.e., the liberal arts). We alluded prior to the “liberal” nature of this education in that it frees men to pursue the truth and to seek his own virtue. Without a liberal education, man is prone to fall prey to vices, as well as the everchanging opinion of the majority (or of the powerful). A truly liberal education grounds men through a study of first principles, providing the foundation necessary for all subsequent knowledge, thereby fulfilling the natural end of his intellectual being

²⁵ Maritain i.1930-67: *The Education of Man*, 39-40: “Every theory of education is based on a conception of life and, consequently, is associated necessarily with a system of philosophy. . . . Education ‘follows the flux and reflux of philosophical currents.’ It is not an autonomous science, but dependent upon Philosophy.”

(i.e., that which renders man unique among all corporeal beings). Maritain described such an education as:²⁶

... those disciplines which make man more human, or nurture in man his nature as specifically human, because they convey to him the spiritual fruit and achievements of the labor of generations, and deal with things which are worth being known for their own sake, for the sake of truth or the sake of beauty.

This, however, is a clear parallel to Maritain's definition of culture:²⁷

Culture or civilization is the expansion of the properly human life, including not only whatever material development may be necessary and sufficient to enable us to lead an upright life on this earth, but also and above all moral development, that development of speculative activities and of practical (artistic and ethical) activities which is properly worthy of being called a human development.

Thus, there is a natural connection between culture and education, as education is not only a part of culture itself, sharing in the aim of making men “more human,” but it furthers the development of the culture itself by bolstering the intellectual virtues of those within. Hence, to be educated is also to be “cultured.”

As we consider the relationship between education and culture, however, we move beyond the importance of education on the individual person to its relation with

²⁶ Maritain i.1930-67: *The Education of Man*, 85. Emphasis added.

²⁷ Maritain 1936: *Integral Humanism*, 212. Emphasis added. Compare to Pope St. John Paul II's similar explanation of culture in relation to human existence: “*Genus humanum arte et ratione vivit* (Humanity lives by creativity and intellect; cf. St. Thomas, commenting on Aristotle, in *Post. Analyt.*, n. 1). ... The essential meaning of culture consists, according to these words of St. Thomas Aquinas, in the fact that it is a characteristic of human life as such. *Man lives a really human life thanks to culture.* Human life is culture in this sense too that, through it, man is distinguished and differentiated from everything that exists elsewhere in the visible world: man cannot do without culture.” – “Man's Entire Humanity is Expressed in Culture: Address of John Paul II to UNESCO (June 2, 1980),” in *Church and Culture Since Vatican II: The Experience of North and Latin America*.

the common good. Indeed, man has a responsibility to develop his intellect in accord with truth, not merely for the sake of accruing knowledge, but to properly inform his moral conscience. This not only affects him in his own life and fulfillment as a person, but it affects those around him as man is political by nature. Education, therefore, has a political dimension, such that it ought to serve the common good alongside the good of the student. Maritain thought this was particularly crucial in democracies as there is a greater responsibility placed upon each citizen by the inherent nature of the political form.²⁸ Every political society must be grounded upon a common culture that unites the citizens to begin with.²⁹ The education of every citizen, then, must elaborate upon that cultural worldview and its relation to the true and the good. At the very least, it must provide for each citizen a common language and frame of meaning particular to the culture that would facilitate exchanges between them in their respective communities. It is not a coincidence that political fragmentation has continued to grow as education has fallen short of its true purpose in the West.

With all these concerns in mind, we may turn our attention finally toward the aims of the Lyceum Institute. The Lyceum Institute was founded upon the recognition that today's modern educational system has failed to address the

²⁸ Maritain 1943: *Education at the Crossroads*, 19: "Yet there exists everywhere a trend toward such a conception of education [i.e., the utilitarian model described above], following a more or less conscious materialistic philosophy of life. This represents a great peril for the democracies, because the democratic ideal more than any other requires faith in and the development of spiritual energies—a field which is over and above any specialization—and because a complete division of the human mind and activities into specialized compartments would make impossible the very 'government of the people, by the people, and for the people.' How could the common man be capable of judging about the good of the people if he felt able to pass judgment only in the field of his own specialized vocational competence?"

²⁹ Maritain 1930: *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 69: "What determines the unity of a culture is first and above all a common philosophical structure, a certain metaphysical and moral attitude, a common scale of values—in short, a common idea of the universe, of man and of life, of which the social, linguistic, and juridical structures are, so to speak, the embodiment."

proper needs of man that were provided by a classically liberal education. In contrast with the modern academy, the Lyceum does not offer vocational training to its participants, rather, it offers a true community with the aim of furthering their education for their own sake as persons. Furthermore, it carries with it the broader aim of combating a disordered culture by reintroducing order and meaning through a proper education. Lastly, it is made clear that a true education does not end at any given point, but continues onward until death, as above all, it is a habit which enables the attainment of real virtue and genuine happiness.³⁰

³⁰ Maritain 1943: *Education at the Crossroads*, 25-26: “School and college education is only a part of education. It pertains only to the beginnings and the completed *preparation* of the upbringing of man, and no illusion is more harmful than to try to push back into the microcosm of school education the entire process of shaping the human being, as if the system of schools and universities were a big factory through the back door of which the young child enters like a raw material, and from the front door of which the youth in his brilliant twenties will go out as a successfully manufactured man. Our education goes until our death.”

SIGNS OF MEANING

THE NEED FOR SEMIOTICS³¹

BRIAN KEMPLE
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Allow me to begin with a prefatory comment: it is difficult to give an introduction to semiotics of any length for two reasons. The first, and perhaps more obvious reason, is that few people know what it really is, despite the wide diffusion of the term throughout academia over the last century. I suspect that, like many terms, it is adopted precisely *because* few people know what it really is: this ambiguity hides many sins of incoherent use. The second reason for our difficulty, very much related to the first, is that semiotics is at once a relatively new doctrine and

³¹ Originally delivered as a lecture at St. Vincent's College in Latrobe, PA, on 2 December 2021.

yet it subsumes and incorporates and even elevates disciplines very ancient.³² It brings us face to face with something unknown and yet nevertheless deeply familiar; and perhaps, even, unknown *because* it is so familiar.

And so, although the temptation in a presentation such as this is to pass a considerable amount of time traversing the meandering inquiry of *what semiotics* is—wending through the particularities of its doctrines, its terminologies, its histories—I will spend relatively little time re-treading those already well-worn steps. Rather, I wish to head in a different direction, and I hope that you all will walk this perhaps even-more meandering path alongside me.

1. HOPE AND MEANING

Who among you—I am both curious and a little afraid to ask—who among you feels confident today about the near future: about your future, about the future of your culture, your country, or of the whole world? I ask it as a rhetorical question, of course: no doubt the answers you would give would vary from individual to individual, and perhaps those answers vary even within your own individual minds. That is, we all I think have at least a few reasons today to feel hope, for ourselves and the world, as well as reasons to feel fear; reasons to believe that things will improve, and other reasons to believe that they may get far, far worse—in or after our lifetimes. Both this fear and this hope seem accelerated by the speed at which the human experience of the world seems today to change: a speed unlike in any era previous. The swiftness of news, the shortness of its cycle; the instantaneous draw, pull, connection to events and persons across the globe; the

³² On this point, one can consult the magnum opus of John Deely, 2001: *Four Ages of Understanding: The First Postmodern Survey of Philosophy from Ancient Times to the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* and all its many pages.

endless distraction from distraction by distraction. The digital age in which we are immersed by every screen at nearly every waking hour of the day allows us no sense of *rest*, of *contemplation*, of *residing in some continual presence of what we might consider true or meaningful*: we seem no sooner to think that we might be beginning to understand what is happening in the world, that we might have gained a sense of what is true, than everything shifts, is tossed, and we are entangled by other threads of different, competing, and always incomplete narratives. I suspect that this perpetual psychological unrest has led many to despair of “truth” as a good to be obtained and therefore even to be sought, and thus, instead, the very concept of truth becomes relativized: *my* truth, *your* truth, *our* truth; but less and less is there a widespread or commonly accepted belief in and seeking of *the* truth.

Who among us can live like this? Not a one of you, and not me, either. That is, I do not think that this swirling, chaotic, disinformational, “post-truth” world is a situation to which human beings can adapt. We *are* adaptable creatures, granted—more so, probably, than at least any other mammal. We find ways to endure, to survive, to thrive even, despite unfavorable conditions. But this enduring, surviving, and thriving... it does not come as an inevitable consequence of being in any environment whatsoever. It comes as a matter of those environments being structured by principles fitting to our own nature, to what we are as human beings. We have a fundamental human need, in order that we can endure, survive, and thrive—a need for coherence, for the objects and experiences of our life to *fit together*, somehow, and that coherence itself needs some principle: some **cause** which holds it all together. Our current absence of a coherent world, and the growing cultural and psychological dissonance both between and within individual persons, bespeaks the absence of just such a principle and the absence of such causality in our lives.

I am here to argue that semiotics—and I believe semiotics alone, as bold a claim as that may be—is the study which can provide that principle we so sorely need.

For inasmuch as we use anything we do not understand, however successfully we might regard that results of that use, we nevertheless thereby expose ourselves both to errors of our own making and manipulation by others, most especially if we are complacent about the role that these means play in our lives. I, for one, think this is obvious; and its obviousness may be seen by a moment's reflection on how people become drug addicts, or addicted to pornography, or persuaded by any advertising or marketing campaign to buy things which not only do they not need, but which perhaps they do not even truly want. Despite the obviousness of this truth, we all continue carelessly to make use of many things we do not understand, and nothing more commonly—and dangerously—than **signs**. Indeed: signs are *omnipresent* in our experience. They permeate every academic discipline or field, every class presentation or assignment, every lecture or question and answer session. You are immersed in a world of signs at this very moment, and have been every day—every hour, every minute—of your entire life. You cannot read a press release, or hear a news report, cannot view statistics nor pick up a journal from a library, a book of philosophy or literature or history, without thereby moving deeper into a **sign-perfused reality**; you cannot drive down the road, whether it is an interstate highway or a back-country gravel path, without using countless signs to do so. You cannot even have a conversation or look at another person's face or have a single banal, mundane, idle thought about the cute girl who sits next to you in class or the bus or what to watch on television or streaming services or social media feeds without making use of signs—and all this barely scratches the surface of our specifically-human **semiosis**, that is, the use of signs which we make inasmuch as we are human.

If we are to take or understand anything as having **meaning**, that is, as having some *reality* such that we can *say what it is*, even vaguely or obliquely, we do so because it has been **signified** to us, somehow. The causality whereby such signification occurs is itself always a complex web and a collective, cultural, widespread ignorance of that web has allowed chaos and confusion, disinformation and a pervasive relativization of the truth, spurred on by a rapid advance of communication technologies and the instantaneity of information access, to spiral out of control, both in our own lives as individuals and as a culture, perhaps, even, as a civilization.³³

In this essay, drawing upon a few powerful insights of the late semiotician John Deely (1942—2017)—a man once called the most important living American philosopher,³⁴ and with whom I wrote my doctoral dissertation—drawing upon Deely’s thought, I will sketch an outline of how semiotics, as the study whereby we learn how to interpret signs, can have an impact on everything else we do, with the expectation that further connections may be discovered by the reader and the author alike; and, moreover, with the hope that you will see, regardless of your field or focus of study or career, that **semiotics** stands as a **necessity** to it: perhaps not intrinsically (though it may certainly benefit there, as well), but undoubtedly in the coherence of your work and thinking with the rest of the world.

2. BEING AS FIRST KNOWN

Before taking up the explicit impact of semiotics, however, I must remark that it was one of Deely’s most-frequent and best articulated claims—and, in a way, the

³³ Cf. Kemple 2019: *The Intersection of Semiotics and Phenomenology: Peirce and Heidegger in Dialogue*, 19-21 and 279-84.

³⁴ Coblely 2010: *The Routledge Companion to Semiotics*, 203.

one that lead me to study with him—that human beings are distinguished among all the other animals in our cognitive capabilities by a unique relation to signs and specifically regarding the awareness of signs: that is, where all animals commonly *make use* of signs, only human beings³⁵ are *aware* of the fact that they make use of signs.³⁶ Or to put this another way...

All animals exist within some environment. By the word “environment” I mean not only the surrounding physical things—such as the deer that may exist among trees, and streams, foliage and other animals—but rather I mean the **patterns of relations** between those things and the animals cognizant of them. Animals, in other words, do not live among things *as things*, but rather among things as *objects relative to themselves*. The deer does not see a tree, but that which shelters; not a stream, but that which quenches thirst; not foliage but food, and not a wolf but a threat. Similarly, your dog hears your car coming up the driveway and knows that you are returning home—but the dog does not know **what** a driveway is, nor a car, nor even what *you* are. You are that which feeds, and loves, and cares, and that for which your dog cares and loves, as well. She may pine for your return, but she does not contemplate what it means for you to be human; or what it means to be male, or female; or what the sun is, or what it might signify, or whether we ought to worship it. The *meaning* of any sign, for any non-human earthly creature, is *entirely circumscribed* by its reference to the animal: that is, its meaning for the animal depends ultimately upon a series of estimations concerning whether

³⁵ My own work has centered around this claim. See both Kemple 2017: *Ens Primum Cognitum in Thomas Aquinas and the Tradition: The Philosophy of Being as First Known* and 2019: *Intentionality and Semiotics: Peirce and Heidegger in Dialogue*.

³⁶ See especially Deely 2010: *Semiotic Animal: A Postmodern Definition of “Human Being” Transcending Patriarchy and Feminism*; 2007: *Intentionality and Semiotics: A Story of Mutual Fecundation*; and 2002: *What Distinguishes Human Understanding?*

the object is beneficial, harmful, or neutral with respect to itself. In other words, meaning for non-human animals is not only *self-centric* but *wholly self-oriented*. By contrast, meaning for the human being—while it *incorporates* this referentiality—depends instead on what things are in themselves, independently of our evaluation of them as beneficial, harmful, or neutral with respect to ourselves. We *do* contemplate what it means to be human, or to be male, or female, or what the sun is, whether we ought to worship it, and what it tells us about the structure of the solar system, the galaxy, the cosmos at large, and even about ourselves—and we do this, if we think clearly enough, not merely to make better evaluations of potential benefit and harm, but because this contemplation befits our very nature.

But, simultaneously, this **irreducibility** of our objects to our own evaluations of them is what makes coherence so much more *difficult* for us human beings. Your dog does not have to worry about injustice or laws or whether she ought to focus on career or having puppies—in fact, she *cannot* have such worries; rather she worries about dinner, treats, and pets. Matters are not so simple for us. Whether we are *right* about our actions, that is, seems not merely a matter of our own making or satisfaction, but rather to depend upon something larger and independent of us. Consider theories of what it is to be human: we have such theories from the pre-Socratics, through Plato, and Aristotle; from East and West; from Catholicism, Latin Scholasticism, Renaissance humanism, Enlightenment rationalism, and our current hypermodern quasi-existentialist subjectivism.³⁷

³⁷ *Quasi-existentialist*, that is, because it adopts the “liberation from extrinsically-imposed meaning”—by which really is meant responsibilities to nature and creation—characteristic of thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, but shirks the “responsibility for constituting and maintaining the meaning of all things, always, in all times and places” intrinsic to the theory.

Thus, faced with a question about the meaning and rectitude of human life and its conduct, we might ourselves come up with answers correct, incorrect, or partly right and partly wrong; or we might listen to competing answers given by others, similarly deviant from correctness, mingled and mangled into a hodgepodge simulacrum of a true answer. We might then, dismayed by one such disappointing simulacrum after another, come to believe that there *is* no truth about anything, no meaning, no intelligibility, no correct or incorrect ways of living, or even that we are incapable of attaining any such truth; but even such beliefs as these, too, are at least implicitly claims *about things themselves*.

This orientation of our cognitive lives toward things as they are in themselves—not exclusively, but undeniably so-ordered—is what we mean by saying that humans know *being*. To know being is to see beyond the limitations of mere animal estimation—it is what enables us to say whether something is *good* or *bad*, not merely whether we like it or not.

Of course, this knowledge whereby good is discerned from bad does not come immediately or all at once, nor easily—most especially because we *are* also quite concerned with whether or not we like and want to possess or use or derive pleasure from things and will often go through impressive mental gymnastics to justify ourselves liking something which is, in fact, something bad; indeed, to convince ourselves that it is *not* bad; that it is, in fact, really something *good*. So how, we must ask ourselves, do we guide our interpretations—how do we navigate these complex paths of liking and disliking, of discovering the good and distinguishing it from the bad?

My answer, succinctly stated, is that the good and our ability to obtain it always depends upon the *truth* about the good. And here it is that semiotics enters as the discipline and study which can become such a guide.

3. SEMIOTICS: NORMATIVE SCIENCE OF TRUTH

Despite my attempts to avoid the question and however briefly I wish to answer it, we must nevertheless ask: what is semiotics? It has been defined and described in many ways. I like myself to call it (though not *define* it) the unveiling of the familiar unknown, for it studies *signs*, and unveils the nature and functioning of signs, and signs are as engrained in our existence as breathing; though most people have likely thought more about their breathing than they have about signs, at least, signs explicitly insofar as they are signs. Deely *defined* semiotics—and in this I agree with him—in what is likely the simplest, most succinct, and most accurate definition, as the study of the *action* of signs: that is, *how* it is that signs do what they do.³⁸

But there is another definition of semiotics, offered by its most important founder, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), and a definition which ought to make us pause and think about what we are doing in this discipline: namely, that semiotics is the *normative science of truth*.³⁹ This definition demands of us two further questions: namely, what is meant by “normative” and what is meant by “science”. As to the latter, it was the eventual position of Peirce himself that the most fundamental meaning of science was neither the common definition which possibly rings familiar to most persons today, that is, of “an organized body of knowledge”, nor was it merely the modern methodology of hypothesis and experimentation (though this enters into it), but rather a continuing, communal, collective inquiry whereby we seek better understanding of **what is**: a concept

³⁸ Deely 1990: *The Basics of Semiotics*, 25 (9th edition, 2021).

³⁹ Peirce 1903a: “The Three Normative Sciences” in *EP2*: 199-200; cf. 1903b: “An Outline Classification of the Sciences” in *EP2*: 260.

which does not reject the other two, but includes and elevates them into something larger.⁴⁰

For a science to be *normative* means that it directs this continuing communal inquiry towards the general rules or laws governing the object that it studies. Thus, semiotics as the normative science of truth is that science whereby we understand the constitution of truth itself: what it is, always, how it can come into being, generally, and the manners in which it may be revealed, following upon what it is and how it can come into being.

Broadly speaking—or at least, broadly speaking enough for our own purposes here today—Peirce distinguished sciences into what would be called **idioscopic** and **cenoscopic** manners of inquiry. The idioscopic are those studies that today we normally call “science”: studies such as biology, chemistry, physics, medicine, geology, and so on. The cenoscopic comprises what we might call the humanities,⁴¹ although it should be noted that our contemporary divisions do not align with those that Peirce himself proposed. Regardless, Peirce placed semiotics among the cenoscopic sciences—but this does not mean that semiotics has nothing to say about the practice of idioscopic sciences or their orientation toward the truth. Far from it: for what distinguishes the idioscopic from the cenoscopic is that the former relies upon specialized training and the use of specific instruments or methodologies for conducting its research, while cenoscopic inquiry concerns the use of that most general instrument accessible by all human beings, namely, our natural capacity for intellectual reasoning: that specifically human attunement to studying *what things are*, in other words, to conceive of

⁴⁰ For a good discussion of this view of science, see Fisch 1978: “Peirce’s General Theory of Signs” in Sebeok ed., *Sight, Sound, and Sense*, 31-70.

⁴¹ An oversimplification, in many ways, but sufficient for the purposes of this essay.

their *being*. Whatever discoveries we make within the idioscopic—which is, indeed, concerned principally with the **discovery** of new phenomena—must be resolvable to a general intelligibility as **true**, and thus, such discoveries rely upon that **normativity of truth provided by semiotics**.

For all our studies are carried out by the use of signs—as aforementioned, you cannot do *anything* without making use of them. But to *understand* that which we are studying, do we not need to understand the means by which that study is carried out? Can we understand what our numbers, our statistics, our tables and figures, our diagrams and our words and arguments signify if we do not have some understanding of signification itself?

Therefore, let us take up this fundamental question: namely, **what is a sign?** This is a question of paramount universal importance. There are many answers which have been offered: that the sign is that which affects a relation of *renvoi*, that the sign is that which every object presupposes, that the sign is that which stands for something other than itself; all of these are true answers, though by themselves, do not sufficiently inform us as to the nature of the sign. We need a deeper understanding, lest we make the common mistake of taking the sign to be some individual *thing*: like the stop sign at the street corner, or the plastic signs informing us where to exit a building, the seal of a college, or the logo for a company, like the Nike swoosh or the Facebook “f”—all these things, to be sure, play a role in signification, but they do not exhaust *what a sign is*—nor, for that matter, do they fundamentally *constitute* the sign. More is required. Consider: a young woman from a remote, isolated village on North Sentinel Island (one of the few remaining isolated societies on earth) would have no conception of the law signified by the stop sign. Seeing one, would it still signify to her the same way that it does to you? Similarly, someone unlearned in the English language

may not know the word “exit”; and a great many people, seeing the seal of a small college in rural Pennsylvania, may recognize it as vaguely heraldic, but would they know it signifies a particular college—or even any college at all? Younger individuals might see the logo for Facebook and think, “ah, the social media for old people”, whereas their grandparents might see it and think, “Ah, it’s that hip thing all the kids use!”

Put otherwise, these things we ordinarily call signs are, in fact, what have been better termed **sign-vehicles**. They convey signification, but they do not constitute it—for, in order that signification occurs, one thing must signify something other than itself to a yet further something other than itself. There need to be three terms involved, in other words: first, a signifier, sign-vehicle, or that which does the signifying, which Peirce sometimes called a **representamen**; second, a significate, or the **object** which is signified; and, third, what Peirce termed the **interpretant**, that to which the signification is made. One and the same representamen, seen by two different interpretants, may signify objects different from each other, at least in part. You and your grandmother both see the Facebook logo, and both of you may have the object of social media in mind, but that objectified social media is not conceived as the same by each of you—just as *you* may see the seal of the college you attended and therefore think of it, while someone from the remote village of Kalanak in Tajikistan, seeing that same seal, would likely think of something else entirely.

The *actuality* of signification, therefore, *always consists in some relation*, and, therefore indeed, the sign itself is constituted as an **irreducibly triadic relation between an object and an interpretant, accomplished through the mediation of a sign-vehicle**. Absent this triadic structure, signification does not occur, and nothing would be a sign in actuality.

4. FRAGMENTATION OF OUR STUDIES

Further, absent an *awareness* of this triadic relation, we may frequently misunderstand the signs through which our world is constituted, and perhaps most especially within our academic studies, both in relation to one another and within themselves. I wish here to unveil, briefly and passingly and perhaps somewhat contentiously, some of the apparent faults currently undermining a few fields of study: first, psychology; second, biology; third, philosophy, and fourth, communication and journalism. As a caveat: I am not here attempting to demonstrate convincingly anything concerning these disciplines, but only to show some of what appear to be deep and dangerous chasms in the landscape of meaning.

4.1. PSYCHOLOGY

In 2015, a report was published by the Open Science Collaboration in which it was shown that among 100 studies published in high-ranking psychology journals—the literature that drives the field—only a relatively small percentage could be replicated with strong results. To put this in simple words, a very large number of studies which were published and often promoted as though demonstrating strong or even unquestionable evidence in support of a hypothesis, were, in fact, undermined by profound flaws in their research conduct and possibly the methodologies of the psychological field as a whole. This “replication crisis”, as it has been called, extends to include studies in medicine, economics, marketing, and other disciplines as well, but has most profoundly been exhibited in psychology.

Why this profound and systemic problem? On the one hand, the replication crisis clearly and explicitly unveiled faulty and often ethically-questionable if not downright immoral practices in the conduct of much research: manipulation of

data to exclude problematic results, or to find coincidental correspondences which could nevertheless be proposed as correlational and therefore significant; post-hoc reinterpretations of data—fudging one’s hypothesis, in other words, to fit the results; as well as the pervasive problem of publication bias (in other words, that journals prefer the sexy positive results, rather than the dull negative results—and so researchers are inclined to seek and publish as though they have discovered something positive, even if the negative is more important for the advance of science in its proper methodology). These problems plaguing the discipline have led to unresolved confusions and deep rifts among its practitioners.

One such example of these rifts can be found in a concept frequently touted within social psychology over the past twenty-plus years, namely the concept known as “ego depletion”. Summarily stated, ego depletion holds that *willpower* or *volition* is a limited mental resource which is exhausted over time—much like energy in your muscles—and needs to be replenished before one is able to have control over oneself again: that you can only hold out against a temptation or a desire, in other words, for so long—and if you are tired, or inebriated, or otherwise impaired, you will have less ability to maintain your will. In some ways, this phenomenon names something obviously true—that is, it is obviously true that our self-control varies and that it becomes more difficult to maintain when we are impaired. But the central core of the hypothesis—that this ability for self-control is a *resource*—has become quite controversial.

The original study was published in 1998,⁴² and has since been cited at least 6,631 times (as of December 2021), according to the metrics provided by Google Scholar. Countless other studies have been performed on the presumption of its

⁴² Baumeister et al. 1998: “Ego depletion: Is the active self a limited resource?” in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74.5: 1252-65.

basic premise; the lead author of the original study penned a New York Times bestseller popularizing the concept for the self-help market;⁴³ and countless other peddlers of self-help psychology have latched on to the idea: to the extent, even, that there is a “Willpower for Dummies” book. Since the replication crisis, however, other analyses have challenged the validity of ego depletion experiments, while others still have attempted to verify them, with both sides primarily focusing on the methodology. And so the debate continues.

So long as the focus remains on methodology, however, I think that neither this problem nor many of the others within psychology will be resolved. For the deepest problem is not whether the methodology is sound: although such *is*, of course, a problem of pressing and central concern within the discipline of psychology itself and one to which semiotics may be of aid, inasmuch as it may help to clarify the nature and functioning of the signs produced by its experiments. But the deeper problem—which the replication crisis has also helped to unveil, but less clearly and only implicitly—concerns the **meaning** of *what it is that is even being studied*. The intended object of study, the *psyche*, that is, has become so isolated from the contexts of *being* that the results become almost if not entirely unintelligible to anyone outside the discipline. And even then, those within the discipline are, I suspect, often talking past one another without realizing: their words—their sign-vehicles—may appear to be the same, but I am not convinced that they are always speaking about the same objects, a confusion constituted not only in efforts at communication between psychologists, but often even within the mind of each individual practitioner or theoretician of the science.

⁴³ Baumeister and Tierney 2011: *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength*.

4.2. BIOLOGY

To turn our attention to the second topic, let us think briefly about controversies within the science of biology; and specifically those controversies concerning the beginning and end of life. I am not here attending to the moral issues involved—to which semiotics can be of great help as well—but rather to the scientific questions which must necessarily precede any inquiry into the moral: that is, the question of what it means for something to be *alive*. It may seem this is strictly a biological question, perhaps even *the* biological question; but it seems also a question that biology may not in fact be equipped to answer.

That is: can we discern a line of demarcation, on one side of which something is said to be alive, and on the other side, not? What is it that makes a living organism to be *living*? The “standard” answer given in contemporary biology is not entirely standard. Generally, in textbooks and websites, we find a list of characteristics which must be possessed, but these lists vary widely: some include five characteristics, others seven, others yet as many as ten or twelve. There is not yet and may never be—if things continue on as they have—a universal consensus within biology on what it means to be “alive”. But even if there is: does that consensus result in *meaning*? Is “being alive” nothing more than satisfying a checklist?

Commonly, the characteristics enumerated within these lists include *growth and development*, the *use of energy*, the ability to *reproduce*, a constitution from *cellular structures*, and some degree of *responsiveness* and *adaptiveness* to the environment.⁴⁴ But what does it mean, to focus on just two of these, to be

⁴⁴ Cf. Fowler, Roush, Wise, et al. 2017: *Concepts of Biology*, 5-9; Kratz and Siegfried 2010: *Biology for Dummies*, 14-15; Brooker et al. 2018: *Principles of Biology*, 2-5; Freeman et al. 2017: *Biological Science*, 46; and many, many others.

responsive or *adaptive*? If something is responsive to environment but in a highly dependent way, where the use of energy by the organism is directly dependent upon something provided by the environment, does it still count as living? Does the *virus*, for instance, count as living based upon the above criteria, given the extent to which its apparently vital activity is entirely dependent upon the cell of some other living organism? No—for they are not made of cells; but how then are we to explain its life-like activities, its *responsivity* to environment or the *adaptivity* as it moves through one mutation after another in seeking continued replication?

Semiotics does immediately provide some understanding of viral activity, I believe: namely, that the virus, inasmuch as it does not engage actively in what we call **endosemiosis** while outside the cell (that is, an internal process of sign-use) does have the potency for **exosemiosis** (a process of sign-use relative to something outside of itself) whereby it infects the cell and through that exosemiosis alters the cell's own endosemiotic functioning.⁴⁵ I do not mean, here, to get into the weeds of semiotics—I mention these distinctions of endo- and exosemiosis only to say that with semiotics, we may provide an intelligible account of how and why the virus exists on the threshold of life—if we understand “life” in semiotic terms, that is, insofar as life consists in a certain utilization of signs in accordance with the internal structure of the being as it relates to its environment; revealing to us, perhaps, that life is not intelligibly distinguished by a threshold, but a gradient.

Or consider the debated, controversial topic of “brain death”; that is, although neurological criteria have been used to determine the death of human beings since

⁴⁵ Cf. Hoffmeyer 2008: “Semiotic Scaffolding of Living Systems” in Barbieri et al., *Introduction to Biosemiotics*, 153.

the 1950s, challenges have been raised against these criteria since the late 1980s, given that numerous studies have shown that the bodies of “brain dead” individuals sometimes go on living and even developing despite the lack of extrinsic medical intervention.⁴⁶ In other words, the criteria of “brain death” is linked to the integrative functioning of the whole body—its normal responsiveness and adaptation to environment, in other words—but there is evidence that this may not be the whole story. In other words, there is no doubt that the body of a “brain dead” person continues living, if we understand “living” or the life of any organism to consist in a certain pattern of semiosis.

4.3. PHILOSOPHY

Third, I wish to say a brief word about my own discipline, namely philosophy: for today it suffers no less an incoherence than any of the other sciences. No small part of this incoherence stems from the fact that philosophy is accepted, even by many who claim the name of “philosopher”, *as though just one among the other sciences*. This reduction of its scope and place in the intellectual life of our culture explains more than anything else the fragmentation of our understanding in contemporary society.

I will avoid the thorny and complex history of this diminution of the philosophical—and say instead that its current effete standing ought to be taken as an opportunity to question again into its own roots: that is, to ask, *what is*

⁴⁶ Cf. Accad 2015: “Of wholes and parts: A Thomistic refutation of ‘Brain Death’” in *The Linacre Quarterly* 82.3: 217-234; Shewmon 1998: “‘Brainstem death’, ‘brain death’ and death: A critical re-evaluation of the purported equivalence” in *Issues of Law and Medicine* 14.2: 125-45; and 2001: “The brain and somatic integration: Insights into the standard biological rationale for equating ‘brain death’ with death” in *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 26.5: 457-478.

philosophy? Is it a science, or a field of studies, or something else? Antiquity, to be certain, did not view it as a one-among-many of the courses one could take or degrees one could earn in an academy.⁴⁷ Rather, it was a way of living, a way of ordering one's thinking, a way of *questioning* one's own understanding, a way of being-in-the-world that sought the *true* and not merely apparent goods. It is a habit of seeking understanding, not merely of this or that particular object of study, but of all things, together, as a certain whole. By contrast, today, one attempting to discover the nature of philosophy will be bombarded with distinctions of schools, approaches, traditions, central figures or thinkers, and increasingly nuanced debates entry into which removes one ever farther from the common life of human beings.

Thus, philosophical study, insofar it becomes self-contained and insular, thereby loses its proper character; and, indeed, by the loss of the proper character of philosophy, so too do *all* the other sciences lose their own proper characters. Absent the unity affected by philosophical wisdom, the sciences spiral outward in their own distinct studies, and lose whatever commonality allows them to be understood together.

Arguably, what has always made any inquiry philosophical is that it has been a *cenoscopically semiotic* inquiry: an inquiry, that is, into the signs of our own knowledge about some object conducted according to the well-trained use of the common faculty of human intellectual reasoning. By a reflective and explicitly semiotic structuring of philosophical inquiry we discover the continuity between its current specific divisions: between ethics and natural philosophy, between

⁴⁷ Even not so long ago, in fact, was this a more common way of viewing philosophy: it is no accident that the highest titled awarded in most fields of study is *doctor of philosophy*.

politics and metaphysics, between a philosophy of knowledge and a philosophy of culture, and so on. Absent such a reflective and explicitly semiotic structuring—as today prevails in the academy—philosophy seems often to merely limp along.

Historically, the tradition of Latin Scholasticism—so essential to understanding semiotics in our own day—aimed at philosophical unity through the study of metaphysics, metaphysics understood specifically as the study of being insofar as it is being. Thus, the unity of Scholastic philosophical inquiry has been directed at cognition-independent beings. Often conflated with “being as being”, within this tradition, was the notion we discussed earlier of being as first known. Conversely, modern philosophy, beginning with René Descartes, has focused its inquiry upon cognition itself—turning “being” into something “out there”, in the *world*, while “thought” is something “in here”, in the *mind*. In the words of Peirce, this dualist philosophy is that which “performs all its analyses with an axe, leaving, as the ultimate elements, unrelated chunks”.⁴⁸ While the metaphysical studies of Latin scholasticism no doubt give a certain unity to our understanding and provides a certain coherence for the world of things, it does not provide all of its own the necessary understanding of objects. And so it is to a study of being as first known to which we must turn if we are to affect the desired unity of the sciences today.

It is to this being as first known that semiotics resolves as its ground, as the fundament of its own intelligibility. Thus, if philosophy is to regain its own proper unity and coherence, and thereby aid all the other sciences in their recover,

⁴⁸ Peirce 1893: “Immortality in the Light of Synechism” in *EP2*: 2.

in their provision of meaningful truths to the world in which we live, philosophy will do so through what it gains from semiotics.

4.4. COMMUNICATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Finally, to turn to the problems within communication and journalism studies, I wish to consider the very specific way in which its difficulties have become unveiled by networked digital technology—that is, the internet. The early and oft-repeated characterization of the internet is that it is, or was, an “information super-highway”: allowing the best presentation of the purest facts to spread the farthest, the fastest. There was hope it would usher in an age of universal truth. The reality is that the narratives with the greatest **gravity** are drummed out repeatedly, with little regard for whether the facts they include are true or false, and that there is now likely more and more deeply-felt angst over information and disinformation than at any time in all of human history.

Is this angst the effect of bad actors, malicious agents of foreign governments, political ideologues, ideological grifters, malfeasant reporters and journalists serving their own agendas? No doubt, these sources all do contribute to the present miasma of confusion. But even did they not, the *flood* of information provided by the internet is simply *too much*. The overwhelming quantity of information is why *narratives*, rather than sheer naked facts, tend to dominate mass communication today; for narratives provide channels into which facts may be incorporated or from which they may be rejected; mitigated or maximized, hidden or emphasized. To be so-selective about information allows two or more competing narratives to be factually accurate simultaneously while presenting nevertheless incompatible or even contradictory accounts of the events in question. These oppositional, contradictory accounts began to dominate our public discourse in the late 1990s and early 2000s with the “cable news wars”,

but a fragmentation of narrative has exploded ten-thousand-fold with the advent of social media, with the internet of *sharing*, and the ubiquity of its access. Conspiracy theories invariably crop up in consequence: no narrative tells us *everything*, which tends to open up the question: *what aren't they telling us?*

But the conspiracy theory is no longer just for hardcore disbelievers living at the fringes of society, as exhibited in recent years—wherein not only has “fake news” been able increasingly to *disregard* facts by sweeping up large numbers in a persuasive narrative, but conversely, even accurate news can be labelled *fake* for the facts left absent from the presented account. This variation—this labelling and categorization of one and the same thing in radically opposed ways—shows that it is not merely a matter of the *sign-vehicle* and the *object*, but also of the *interpretant*. You might see that news story on Facebook and think it exemplifies racial injustice, while your grandfather might think it exhibits a communist plot—and you both may be partly right, and partly wrong.

The confusion we see here, in other words, is not a matter of the facts as such, but rather of the patterns of relations through which the facts are presented and on which basis they are understood. For instance, reading the news, one source may describe an alleged perpetrator of a criminal act by his race, gender, or the weaponry used; while another describes him by his age, economic status, or emotional state. Each may be entirely accurate, but the inclusion of certain details may suggest a mitigation of guilt, while others indicate an unequivocally malicious intent. Depending upon our own presuppositions—our own *being* as *interpretants*—we may protest against one set of sign-vehicles and accept the other; or we may reject both; or we may recognize, as today I believe we must if we are not to become ideological functionaries ourselves, that the **object** is irreducible to any narrative in which it is placed.

5. SEMIOTICS AND COHERENCE

What are we to make of all this? Anywhere we look around the world today, we find ourselves confronted with confusions about *what things mean*. In all our studies there are countless presuppositions and presumptions, principles taken as axiomatic and unquestioned; *between* our studies, there are widening gulfs of *unmeaning*, filled in by a nominalistic and voluntaristic fabrication of increasingly subjectivized and decreasingly coherent explanation of the world. Someone might infer that the supposed limitations of willpower signify choice as a limited and therefore supremely valuable good; he might develop a neuroreductive conception of the self—an identity of one’s biological selfhood with naught but the brain; he may compound this reductive identity by accepting the dualistic conception of nature and culture; and he may turn these elements through which he conceives the human person into a litmus for which news narratives he accepts and which he rejects. There may be *truths* in his conception, in the narratives he accepts; but is there *truth*? What, if anything, holds it all together?

In recent decades, there has been some focus within the University upon the idea of “interdisciplinarity”: those studies, courses, projects, and publications which attempt to draw upon a multitude of disciplines in order to produce a dynamic and fuller understanding of some complex topic. Heretofore, however, most interdisciplinary efforts have produced naught but a façade of complementarity: they lack any organic or natural unity in their studies and therefore do not produce living traditions of knowledge, but only strange mashups that do not quite work. This thin and ineffective facsimile of the interdisciplinary will remain inept so long as the deeper underlying fault—the presupposition of a **nominalist** framework that takes as given the unreality of relations independent of the mind—governs the structure of the University. To cause a genuine unity of the

disciplines, we need something that perceives the reality of the relations by which they may be united. Thus, by contrast to the contemporary movements of interdisciplinarity, to quote John Deely:⁴⁹

Semiotics, which is nothing but the sign (or rather, semiosis) become conscious of itself, that is, the knowledge resulting from study of the action of signs, equally leads into and cuts across the knowledge of objects of every other type; for the action of signs is what the knowledge of objects presupposes and depends upon throughout. Here “interdisciplinarity”, for the first time and only time, is no longer something contrived, but something inherent.

What makes semiotics inherently interdisciplinary, as Deely says, is the commonality of signs, the action of which cuts across all objects we might study. For, indeed, all our pursuits of knowledge—whether in a formal academic setting or browsing Wikipedia, whether sitting in a lecture hall or reading the news, whether of life or the psyche, whether of communication or technology—all our pursuits of knowledge are ordered to objects but are ordered to objects by means of signs. If we wish to understand the object of *volition*, we need to know what it is and how it is we are signifying it; if we wish to understand the objects of *life* and *death*, this, too, requires such a semiotic reflection—for it is by such a semiotic reflection that we may distinguish the *being* of our objects: distinguish into what is true, and what is false, and therefore into what is good, and what is not.

“Understand this”, Deely states, “and you will understand what it is to understand.”⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Deely 2009: *Purely Objective Reality*, 132-33.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 132.

METHOD AND MEASURE

A REFLECTION INSPIRED BY *EDUCATION AND DIGITAL LIFE*

KIRK KANZELBERGER

MEMBER OF THE BOARD & FACULTY FELLOW

In this era of blame and pugilistic pointing fingers, a new educational proposal would find nothing easier than to try to make room for itself by lambasting the state of existing institutions. One finds something rather different in the proposal titled, *Education and Digital Life*, the founding document of the Lyceum Institute. The symptoms present in those institutions are not overlooked: bureaucratization, corporatization, ideologization, the falling away from the common pursuit of wisdom into “narrow trenches of particular and accidental purposes”... the document mentions all these ills, but notably as *symptoms* of a deeper problem: the deterioration of human habits of reflection and inquiry, both inside and outside of educational institutions.

This problem affects us all, regardless of professional, political, or religious affiliations. It is deeper than the conflicts of so-called “culture wars”, which, insofar as they have become actually “war-like”, are mere ramifications of the problem itself, which has to do above all with how we are *accustomed*, individually and in our communities, to go about making sense of the world around us. To *say* that one “believes in” reflection and inquiry is one thing. To go beyond this notional approval to actual *belief*—belief in Bain’s sense of “that upon which a man is prepared to act”⁵¹— is to have acquired the *habit* of these things. It is this habit that has become increasingly rare.

One could point out that this sort of habit has never been very common, that this “problem” is endemic to the human species. But then the modern rejection of authority in all its forms has created a dilemma for humankind that is the worse insofar as this is so: if we are not to tear each other to shreds, then either the authorities must be restored (that is, believed in), or all must somehow become wise. Any response at all to this dilemma requires that we have the seriousness to ask, “What does it mean to be, or to become, wise?” For if some reliance upon authority is inevitable, to which authorities shall we listen, if not those that are “wiser”?

The proliferation of authorities, or at least of “authoritative voices”, is one aspect of the profound shift, highlighted in *Education and Digital Life*, in the means by which we relate to the world and each other in it—a babel on the internet, in a mutually reinforcing relationship with the chaos in our psyches. Both the babel and the chaos seem by now matters of common observation. What is distinctive of *Education and Digital Life* is how it perceives this same shift as opening up

⁵¹ Alexander Bain 1859: *The Emotions and the Will*, 505.

new possibilities for the growth of the habits of reflection and inquiry, and not just for their dissolution—new possibilities for human flourishing that are, as the author says, “at our fingertips”, available to anyone regardless of state or walk in life, new possibilities that the Lyceum Institute has dedicated itself to fostering. There is more than one kind of digital life we may lead.

Digital life is new; not so the problem of making sense of the world so as to live in it. Every human being must solve this problem, at many levels, over and over again. For if I cannot make sense of the world about me, I cannot choose lines of conduct, cannot act, and so cannot live at all. Deeper even than the difference in the means of communication today is the difference between several ways or “methods” that perennially lie open to human beings for making sense of things, though not all of these ways lead equally to the truth of things which the human mind naturally seeks, in which it naturally reposes, and in which it finds its deepest consolation. I would like to spend the remainder of this brief reflection on the Lyceum Institute’s founding document with a consideration of these ways, with significant support from Charles Sanders Peirce, particularly his 1877 essay, “The Fixation of Belief”.

Let us say you are the sort of person who buys things at vending machines, and let us further say that, unlike the up-to-date consumer who taps a credit card on the reader, you are the less-evolved sort who still carries around change in your pocket. Today you want a bag of chips. You stick your hand in your pocket and pull out a bunch of silver. You hesitate. How do you select the coins for the slot? Your brow furrows slightly. This is Doubt.

Or perhaps you do not hesitate. You long ago decided that the right way to do this is to get rid of as many smaller-value coins as you can, to minimize the load in your pocket. So, you begin with the nickels. Or, you long ago decided that

you can't abide lengthy processes of feeding coins in slots. So, you put in the largest-value coins that appear, and accept any small change the machine might give you, or even abandon it in the coin return. In either event, your brow does not furrow. This is Belief.

If these names—Doubt and Belief—seem too grand for a thing like this, one may choose others as one pleases. Regardless of the names used, what we are *observing* here is the character of our cognition insofar as it is a thing in motion, not in “small matters”, but in *all matters*.

We should not imagine, in other words, that inside us, alongside our practical self, there sits a “pure theoretician”, a little homunculus whose entire placid business is to be indifferently concerned with something called “the truth”. If we long for truth and seek it, it is because we feel the need for it; we feel that we cannot live without it. To whatever extent we do not feel, we do not seek. To the extent we *cannot* feel, we have become a corpse.

Doubt, Peirce said, is like the irritation of a nerve, like an itch. When it is there, we seek to get rid of it, and if we can get rid of it, we do not rest until we have. The whole “point” of this state of mind is that it is a stimulus toward the belief that will settle it—not just “a” stimulus, but *the* stimulus. Insofar as our thought is a thing in motion, a thing that grows and changes, there is no other stimulus. For insofar as doubt has been settled, we are satisfied, and no new growth takes place. New growth will take place only when we feel the need; that is to say, when we have become dissatisfied.

“Some people”, said Peirce, “seem to love to argue a point after all the world”—or, perhaps, all their party or set or congregation or choir or to whom they preach—“is convinced of it. But no further advance can be made. When doubt

ceases, mental action on the subject comes to an end; and if it did go on, it would be without a purpose.”⁵²

Every day you awaken to a world, an environment which, at all its levels— your family life, your circle of acquaintances, the job at which you work, the babel of the media to which you attend, the state of the country, politics and the economy—presents a chaos far less tractable than the pile of change in your pocket. In order to be happy—nay, to make it through this day, or this next hour, or even just to get out of bed—you must somehow have a sense of what to do with yourself and how to conduct yourself, how to direct your own thoughts. To act at random is indistinguishable from not acting. But in order to know what to do with yourself, the chaos, in some way and to some extent at least, must be reduced to order. Doubt must give way to belief. Otherwise, there is no meaningful prospect, no way forward.

Now here is the rub. As soon as we no longer experience doubt, we are perfectly satisfied. But as Peirce tells us, there is more than one way or “method” for achieving this satisfaction, the settling of doubt and the fixing of belief.

1. *Tenacity*: “If settlement of opinion [the removal of doubt] is the sole object of inquiry, and if belief is of the nature of a habit, why should we not attain the desired end, by taking any answer to a question which we may fancy, and

⁵² 1877: “The Fixation of Belief” in *EPI*: 115. Speaking of congregations and choirs, it is worth mentioning that, in his discussion of Augustine’s definition of the theological virtue of faith as *cogitare cum assensione* — “to think with assent” — Thomas Aquinas (see *IIa-IIae* q.2, a.1) underlines the importance of *cogitare* as signifying a mind in motion, a mind inquiring even in the midst of the firmness of *assensione*, a mind *not* settled. A faith that does not think, that does not inquire, is not faith.

constantly reiterating it to ourselves, dwelling on all which may conduce to that belief, and learning to turn with contempt and hatred from anything which may disturb it? This simple and direct method is really pursued by many men.”⁵³ They may pursue it, for example, because they are impatient to act; or, they may pursue it out of their unwillingness to live with any uncertainty, which feels to them like slipping back into chaos. The practical problem with the method of tenacity lies in the difficulty of avoiding the realization that other individuals really do think differently. This upsets the equilibrium of belief, since there is no apparent reason why the view of someone else might not be as good as one’s own.

2. *Authority*: If it is difficult for a whole society to mobilize itself without the beliefs of the community being fixed, then the method of authority offers a solution. What the individual does for himself by the method of tenacity can be done for him by the state, a party elite, a clerisy, or any special class of “those who know”. And it can be done not only for him but for his neighbor, indeed, his whole neighborhood. Protected from dangerous and disharmonious thinking, the capacity of humanity can at last be moved and harnessed as a bloc.

Let all possible causes of a change of mind be removed from men’s apprehensions. Let them be kept ignorant, lest they should learn for some reason to think otherwise than they do. Let their passions be enlisted, so that they may regard private and unusual opinions with hatred and horror. Then, let all men who reject the established belief be terrified into silence. Let the people turn out and tar-and-feather such men, or let inquisitions be made into the manner of thinking of suspected persons, and, when they are found guilty

⁵³ 1877: “The Fixation of Belief” in *EP.I*: 115.

of forbidden beliefs, let them be subjected to some signal punishment. When complete agreement could not otherwise be reached, a general massacre of all who have not thought in a certain way has proved to be a very effective means of settling opinion in a country.⁵⁴

The practical problem with the method of authority is, once again, the inability to keep the reality of differing opinions completely at bay. If Peirce had lived to see it, he might have cited the internet. The method of authority fails for anyone who perceives that belief is in fact being fixed by caprice — whether it be the caprice of individuals or of the elite that takes charge of popular opinion.

3. The *A Priori* method is the naive rationalist's alternative to the first two methods. Descartes would be this method's patron saint, if it had one. Away with the traditions, opinions, and prejudices of humankind! Away with all that merely produces an impulse to believe and does not use reason to discern what shall be believed! Left to itself, human reason has the capacity to work out what is true, simply by discerning what agrees with itself as reason! "This method is far more intellectual and respectable from the point of view of reason than either of the others which we have noticed. But its failure has been the most manifest. It makes of inquiry something similar to the development of taste; but taste, unfortunately, is always more or less a matter of fashion..."⁵⁵ Peirce takes aim at rationalist metaphysicians in this connection: those would-be transcendental mountain-climbers rising above all particular perspectives to survey all reality, and from that Olympian height delivering the great monologue—the system that explains it all. Less grandly,

⁵⁴ 1877: "The Fixation of Belief" in *EPI*: 117.

⁵⁵ 1877: "The Fixation of Belief" in *EPI*: 119.

the method can be seen at work in every intellectual parochialism, every clever cynicism, every ideological and evidence-proof cast of mind. The method was in back of the attack of Charles Kingsley upon John Henry Newman (the Newman whose insight appears so luminously in *Education and Digital Life*)—for Kingsley, the unreasonableness of Newman’s religious opinions proved that Newman was a liar. The method informs the work of that class of writers known as pundits, the self-appointed explainers of chaos — of those at least, whose art involves the conforming of data to preferred hypothesis, that the order of the world and the faith of the faithful reader be preserved.

We have examined into this *a priori* method as something which promised to deliver our opinions from their accidental and capricious element. But development, while it is a process which eliminates the effect of some casual circumstances, only magnifies that of others. This method, therefore, does not differ in a very essential way from that of authority... The very essence of it is to think as one is inclined to think.⁵⁶

4. *Science*: The method of science is distinguished, for Peirce, not by the use of specialized (“idioscopic”) methodologies and measuring devices, but by this “fundamental hypothesis”:

There are real things, whose characters are entirely independent of our opinions about them; those realities affect our senses according to regular laws, and, though our sensations are as different as our relations to the objects, yet, by taking advantage of laws of perception, we can ascertain by reasoning how things really are.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ 1877: “The Fixation of Belief” in *EP.I*: 119 and 121.

⁵⁷ 1877: “The Fixation of Belief” in *EP.I*: 120.

In other words, we must let experience teach us, and never stop letting it teach us, for it is only in this way that there is the possibility of arriving at beliefs that are “caused by nothing human, but by some external permanency—by something upon which our thinking has no effect.” This conception of “something upon which our thought has no effect” is the conception of reality.

Peirce had much more to say about reality and the method of science, the method that “[e]verybody uses. . . about a great many things, and only ceases to use it when he does not know how to apply it.”⁵⁸ The problem of “knowing how to apply the method of science”—the problem of the logical method for inquiring fruitfully—is, Peirce discovered, the problem of understanding signs and how they work. For experience is nothing other than some kind of disclosure of a reality, but this disclosure is always in signs, beginning with the signs constituting perceptions. And whatever of reality is disclosed in a sign may always be further interpreted—that is, the result of disclosure turns out to be itself a sign of the same reality—“and so on”, as Peirce would say, “*ad infinitum*”. Reality never simply drops into our lap as a conquered object; reality is inexhaustible, and is not always as we first imagine it to be.

What distinguishes the method of science from the other three methods is that reality (that upon which our thought has no effect—partly disclosed in signs, yet inexhaustible) is not incidental to the method, but is the *measure* of the method, its polestar. We who cleave to this method of science would above all have our thinking correspond to reality. We value the integrity of a thought more than the

⁵⁸ 1877: “The Fixation of Belief” in *EP*.1: 120.

comfortableness or convenience of it, the goodness of an action (the sort of truth that an action is able to have) more than the energy of it.

We would not take shortcuts to force tractability upon what is chaotic: human affairs, for example, concerning which, as Aristotle said, whatever principles there may be hold “only for the most part”. Rather than pretend to have reduced such chaos to order, we seek, even in the midst of chaos, a deeper order, deeper principles in the knowledge of which one may live truly—even “divine things”.

For wisdom is not finally something of our own devising, but a perfection rooted in what is above us, in which we can yet, if meagerly, come to participate. *Et tamen minimum quod potest haberi de cognitione rerum altissimarum, desiderabilius est quam certissima cognitio quae habetur de minimis rebus.*⁵⁹ Nothing else can satisfy the human heart.

It is to this quest of wisdom that the Lyceum Institute is dedicated. May it and all like endeavors prosper.

⁵⁹ Thomas Aquinas 1266-68: *ST* Ia, q.I, a.5, ad.I: “Nevertheless, the least knowledge we are able to have concerning the highest things is more desirable than the most certain knowledge to be had concerning lesser things.”

THE TRADITION OF QUESTIONING

AT THE DIGITAL CROSSROADS⁶⁰

BRIAN KEMPLE
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Nearly a quarter of the way through the twenty-first century, we find ourselves facing a challenge specifically unlike any known to our forebears, and in that challenge, an opportunity: an opportunity, equally unknown to previous history, for genuine philosophical growth and a revitalization of real education, if we—those philosophers and educators who love the truth and see its essentiality for

⁶⁰ Originally presented on 5 March 2020 at the annual meeting of the American Maritain Association in Pittsburgh, PA.

the good of human beings—can understand, and meet well, that challenge; and thereby seize that opportunity.

Oft-quoted (and seldom understood), Marshall McLuhan (1911—1980)—and I should note that I am not a McLuhan scholar, despite taking some inspiration from the insights in his work—once wrote to Jacques Maritain that, “There is a deep-seated repugnance in the human breast against understanding the processes in which we are involved. Such understanding involves far too much responsibility for our actions.”⁶¹ Does this repugnance sit also in the breast of the philosopher, the twenty-first century person in love with truth and wisdom? Indeed, it does; and today, I would like to challenge everyone who considers him- or herself a lover of truth and wisdom to re-examine the “processes in which we are involved”—and accordingly to take responsibility.

What are we teaching? To whom? How, and to what end? Where—in what intellectual, cultural, sociological place—does our educational tradition exist as something which continues to be handed on, handed-down—to whom, and in what way is it being received? Is a traditional education and the collective number of those who continue adherence to it—or can they be—anything more than a fragmented, disordered, disoriented, internecine club more concerned with debating scholarly minutia than with providing the truths desperately wanted in our culture? Do we know what those truths are—truths about the human person, the human soul and all its faculties, the nature of nature, the nature of knowledge, the importance of habit—and what obstacles prevent their being received?

⁶¹ 1969: Letter to Jacques Maritain of 6 May 1969, in *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion*, 72.

Though I think in particular here of the Thomistic tradition, in which I received my own education from undergraduate onward, I believe what I have to say will resonate beyond the confines of its adherents. For we, as many others today, strive to explain and defend the doctrines of our thinking—Thomistic or otherwise—in books and articles, and lately in YouTube videos, on Twitter, Facebook, and in the ever-dangerous comments section. But is Thomism itself nothing more than a body of doctrines to be explained and defended, or is it not more fundamentally a way of thinking, of studying, of writing, of engaging questions; of living an inquiry? As Maritain writes in *Existence and the Existent*:⁶²

Thomist peace and unity bear no relation to the facile balancings and the dialectical conciliations practiced by a reason installed in the security of an apparatus of ready-made answers that come forth at the click of every imaginable question. They call for never-ending triumphs over ceaselessly recurring conflicts. They require involvement in the thick of new questions in order to bring forth a fresh intuition of new truths, or cause old truths newly penetrated to gush forth from the rock of acquired knowing. They demand communion with all the strivings of research and discovery to release into the light that truth which those strivings ordinarily attain only with the help of the ferments of error, or in ill-fated conceptualisations.

The decades since Maritain wrote these words have seen many balancings and conciliations, but even more frequently, many withdrawals from conflict by those claiming patrimony in the perennial philosophical tradition of the West. Too often has the striving of the Thomist been confined to the library, the journal, to effete efforts at converting a classroom of students at best hostile, and, more

⁶² 1947: *Court Traite de l'Existence et de l'Existant* in the English translation by Lewis Galantieri and Gerald B. Phelan, *Existence and the Existent*, 149.

commonly and worse, indifferent. Disengagement from the questions of our day has led to a decay of our tradition.

We have lived, in the past century, in an era of centralized media and thereby de facto narrative authority—not that we *accepted* or swallowed what was said by that authority, but within which paradigm we lived nonetheless—in which the knowledge of the university professor was culturally superseded by the charisma of the television personality, whose chief merit lay in delivering cocksure rapid-fire ready-made answers. The television paradigm broadly habituated minds away from questioning the truth of reality. But what comes with the digital paradigm? For one, a fragmentation of the centralized narratives of the television age—a diaspora from the Global Village, to play off another phrase of McLuhan’s—and with that, an opening to turn the mind away from fantasy and back towards questioning. Given our tradition, therefore, the Thomist operating in this new technological paradigm, more than the adherents of any other philosophical approach, must take up the practice of questioning yet again.

I will proceed in this essay in three parts: in the first, discussing the challenge of the digital paradigm and the opportunity it affords; second, by explaining what I mean through the phrase, “tradition or practice of questioning” and showing how this tradition in particular grants Thomism the ability to seize the digital opportunity; and third, I will conclude by reflecting on the unknowns of the future.

1. THE DIGITAL PARADIGM

It was the cornerstone of McLuhan’s career to speak about technologies as extensions of the human person: and most especially was he concerned with how each technology altered the ratio of the **exterior** sense powers and the *sensus*

communis (i.e., that faculty whereby the external senses and their objects are distinguished, related, and integrated). While there remain certain missing answers of importance to this question of external sense ratios, the more pressing issue today, I believe, is the alteration of habits of the **interior** sense faculties—those faculties by which mere receptive sensation is turned into active, objectivizing *perception*, where the objects of perception are evaluated and incorporated into the context of distinctly human actions, and where the habits of our holding ourselves in relation to the objects of the external world are established and strengthened or diminished. For the sake of brevity, I am here going to assume a lot of the background in this dimension of the discussion: that is, that technologies *do* influence our faculties in an important way, and that the dominant technological environment of the latter half of the twentieth century—the televisual environment, we might call it—prevailed upon our psychological faculties habits of **fictive imagination**: that is, habits of forming perceptual representative means in accord with fantasies rather than in accord with reality. By fantasies I do not mean in the genre sense of, say, J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* or science-fiction, but something more general: fantasies, that is, meaning idealized or romanticized forms of life.

This effect on the interior sense faculties—where the ratio is less a distortion of faculties and more a distortion of operations—has a domino effect on intellectual procession as well, given the complete reliance of the intellect on the interior senses for forming these perceptual means; needed first in order for any actual discovery of the intelligible and subsequently for any actual understanding to occur.

Against the televisual paradigm's habituation of minds toward fantasy, the digital has irrupted violently into both the psyche and the society: ostensibly in a manner continuous with previous electrical technological progress, but, in truth, as a

psychological anacoluthon the consequences of which are only just now being realized, and dimly. To return to the metaphor of McLuhan, that of the age of television as ushering in a Global Village, it was initially thought that the networked digital technologies would take the Global Village to the next step: one world, one understanding, everyone learning about everyone else and becoming peaceful and tolerant of all divergences. This ideal of peace, love, and understanding is still blindly clung to, desperately, by the founders, for instance, of Twitter and Facebook: places for all ideas to be shared, for communities to form.

The reality is that the Global Village—which was a village not because everyone knew everyone, but because everyone heard the same myths from the same mouths—has been almost entirely abandoned, and certainly by the younger generations: the myths and the mythmakers, the newsmen and the corporate media executives, have been and continue to be exposed, and roving nomads now search the wider world looking for new ideologies and new promises to which they may pledge allegiance.

This disorder, however—the still-rippling shockwaves of the digital irruption—are but the first stage of the new paradigm. To quote McLuhan again:⁶³

...the initial shock gradually dissipates as the entire community absorbs the new habit of perception into all of its areas of work and association. But the real revolution is in this later and prolonged phase of “adjustment” of all personal and social life to the new model of perception set up by the new technology.

What are the new habits of perception being formed by networked digital technology? One might have a knee-jerk reaction, looking at how it disrupts the

⁶³ 1962: *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, 27.

old paradigm, of thinking it is strictly a habit of fragmentation; a habit of distraction from distraction by distraction beyond T.S. Eliot's wildest dreams. And so it will continue to appear, for as long as we treat the digital as only a mere elaboration of the televisual.

But treating it as such is to ignore the fundamental reality of what digital technology *is* and what it *does*: for the essence of digital technology consists in its ability to store increasingly large amounts of data which may be configured for retrieval and representation. In other words, I cannot carry the Smithsonian in my pocket; but I can carry a kind of representation of it; accessing photographs and descriptions of all its works in a matter of moments—much faster, in fact, than I could walk it. I cannot have the *experience* of the museum but I can have an increasingly-complete simulacrum of its contents. Likewise I cannot carry John Deely's bequeathal to St. Vincent's College (roughly 14,000 volumes) on a thumb drive; but I might be able to store a digital facsimile of all it contains—or I might place that facsimile in the networked cloud, and not only allow myself access to it from here, and from home, but also access to someone in Romania, or Estonia, or Sao Paulo, or Hong Kong or anywhere the internet can be accessed.

Digital technology, that is, is essentially **archival**, and it always has been—but with the advent of internet networks and especially of mobile networked devices, we have more and more gateways to that archive: gateways through which data may enter and persons may access it. As anyone having searched through large archives with any regularity will know, the successful use of that archive requires good categorization; and the larger the archive, the better and more thorough a categorization is needed. Conversely, good use of the archive demands that we know how to query it: to ask the right questions within the right categories to find the right answers or retrieve the right information—or sometimes, even, to discover what the right questions really are.

What digital technology demands of us, therefore, is the habit of thinking **categorically**: figuring out what to do with all the data being thrown at us all the time—and that we ourselves are contributing all the time as well—and the habit of thinking **inquisitively**: of knowing how to ask questions intelligently, and how to pursue them doggedly.

2. THE PRACTICE OF QUESTIONING

It is just this archival, categorical, and inquisitive nature of the digital paradigm that brings us, I believe, to the practice of questioning. Far too often, for far too long, the discipline of philosophy—including within the tradition of Thomism—has practiced its science *declaratively*, rather than *inquisitively*. I do not mean that we do not ask questions; of course we do. But we ask them quietly, in our offices, sitting in our chairs at home; at our desks or walking alone; we ask them of the papers in front of us and of the long tradition inherited through our books. We ask these questions, in other words and as it seems to me, in an-ever-narrowing spiral. The relative rarity of Thomists in academia has, rather than pushed us out into the world, led to an even-greater insularity. We are talking only to one another, at best, and very often talking only to ourselves.

I do not know who needs to hear this, but no one outside of a niche within a niche cares about the starting point of metaphysics or whether the separated soul is a whole person, and I, for one, do not judge the common apathy to be unjust. It is important that we continue studying the natural law. But what is the end for which we continue studying it? Is it not to teach it? To demonstrate its applicability in the world to the living of a good and moral life? How successful has that endeavor been for the past fifty or seventy years? Are we, with our study of natural law, doing well enough at answering the questions—resolving the *dubia*—which are posed by people today? It is good in its own right to

understand, best we can, the nature of the relations between divine persons; but is it not better still, understanding those divine relations, to help live out better human relations, too? The starting point of metaphysics *is* an important question—but it is, to most conversations, a non-starter.

Are we burying our talents? I think many Thomists have developed a complacency in the wisdom of Thomism: thinking that all the questions have been sufficiently answered—even worse, perhaps, that all the questions have been sufficiently asked—and that all that is left is, indeed, to sort out whose Thomism, or which tradition.

Aquinas says that there are two instances where, in human actions, we encounter no doubt and therefore have no need of counsel: first, where it makes little-to-no difference which means we employ, and, second, where in order to proceed to certain determinate ends, we have equally certain and determinate ways—as in those arts where the means are well-fixed to attaining the ends.⁶⁴ The practice of philosophy undoubtedly varies in quality by the means we use and, I do not think, is one of those arts; and yet, so it is practiced. Are we practicing philosophy well by debating Existential versus River Forest Thomism? Does the position of Transcendental Thomism deserve any of our attention? Should we care at all about analytic philosophy? The answer to each of these questions, I think—to be very painfully blunt—is “no”. Not that these traditions have not unveiled meaningful and important philosophical truths, or that we should ignore the work of their proponents; but rather that as *traditions*, they are largely unimportant and perhaps do more harm than good. Does a continued obsession with arguing over

⁶⁴ 1269-70: *ST* Ia-IIae, q.14, a.4, c.

which Thomism or whose tradition we should follow fit the good practice of philosophy?

Does our continual looking inwards truly fit the technological environment in which we live, the psychological shift consequent to networked digital abilities, the seeking in our students' minds—or, by a deep-seated repugnance, are we striving blindly after the wrong thing? Are we clinging to a narrow clump of what seems safe ground as the digital irruption throws all around us into discordant chaos?

To answer these question thoroughly, we would have to discuss the influence of technological media on our psychological capacities far beyond the scope and provocative intent of this essay. Most especially, we would have to discuss the concept of the *obiectum movens*,⁶⁵ the motive or stimulating sense of the object—as that which specifies the cognitive faculties to which it is related (as opposed to the *obiectum terminans*, the object as the end or as desired by an already-specified appetitive power). I am not here, today, to answer those questions or provide those discussions, but only to insist they must be pursued—and to indicate that the tradition has the means to answer, if only we would learn well to ask them.

In addition to the habit of categorical thinking—a thinking adept at managing the massive archives of information and knowledge to which we all have ready access, that is—the digital paradigm calls out for *wisdom*: the kind of wisdom with which the world attempted to dispense in the Enlightenment and in the

⁶⁵ This *exact* phrase (*obiectum movens*) appears in Aquinas 6 times: i.1256-59: *De veritate*, q.6, a.2, ad.3; 1259/65: *SCG*, lib.2, c.73, n36; i.1266-70: *De malo*, q.6, c. and q.14, a.3, c.6; and 1270-72: *ST*IIa-IIae, q.145, a.2, ad.1. Aquinas also says that *obiectum movet* in i.1256-59: *DV* q.5, a.10, c. and q.27, a.3, c., as well as 1269-70: *ST*Ia-IIae, q.9, a.1, c. and q.10, a.2, c. A handful of other examples exist in different and less clear formulations.

televisual age; the kind of wisdom that is called out for in the recognition that mere archival information storage and retrieval capacities are insufficient to rightly-direct our lives; the kind of wisdom that knows what it does not know, and seeks to ask the right questions to discover that which it does not know. This is the kind of wisdom Thomism is uniquely positioned today to deliver, given the deep roots of the Thomistic tradition: of involvement in the thick of new questions and research and discovery, not merely to discover a foil against which we may rest on the security of ready-made answers, but in which we may discover and re-discover truths through which we triumph over the ceaselessly recurring and always-evolving conflicts of our worse natures. It is the wisdom of first principles and the ordering therefrom, the wisdom of metaphysics; it is the wisdom of understanding the complexity of naturally-occurring causality, and discerning the order ubiquitous if obscured therein; it is the wisdom of a faculty psychology which can incorporate the truths discovered in other disciplines and traditions to explain what really is going on with our minds, not only perennially but here and now in the unfolding digital paradigm.

3. THE FUTURE UNKNOWN

By way of conclusion, let me say that I do not know, nor profess any forecasting ability, what the digital paradigm will bring in the next ten, fifteen, or twenty years—or beyond. We are faced with contingencies both alike and unlike those that have come before, and the unlike are also unknowns. Elsewhere, I have stated that our ideological situation today is as fragmented as the world after the fall of Rome but our intellectual situation more like the time of sophists, of Athens before Plato and Aristotle: and that, thus, tribal sophistry has made our world a dangerous place to think.

Too often, I believe, we have *outsourced* the security of our intellectual traditions to *systems*: placing our trust not in the virtues of the mind but rather the order of our curricula, the requirements of our universities, the rigor of our testing, the quality of our publications, the pedigree of our credentials and certifications.

I do not know what the future holds. But I do know, I am confident, that if Thomism is to have a prominent place in it—if Thomism is to seize the opportunity afforded by the new digital paradigm—it must be an *inquisitive* Thomism, one which explodes the errors of its day not by being merely another declarative voice in the nomadic wasteland of ideologies, but by honestly, actively, and publicly seeking the truth through a creative inquiry that pursues genuine intellectual virtue.

HAPPY EXILE

A DISPATCH FROM OUTSIDE THE WALLS OF THE ACADEMY

MARK MCCULLOUGH
MEMBER OF THE BOARD

“And the sun set, and all the journeying ways were darkened”
Odyssey II: 12

This year I turn 50, offering me the best excuse to look back over a half century of existence and wonder where it all went wrong. Thankfully, if a midlife crisis is like a one-time toll on the highway of life, I paid mine already, many miles back. At the age of 39, I did what I today tell others *never* to do: I blew up my life. After over two decades in higher education, first as a student and then as teacher

and scholar, I abandoned academia. I wasn't pushed out of the Ivory Tower. I jumped.

Even though (spoiler alert!) I landed on my feet, no one should blow up his life or leap from high buildings when he is in crisis. That's now what I, as a psychotherapist, tell my patients. Better to sit down and contemplate, preferably with another wise person, the path forward. If change is needed, as it often is, take small steps. Remember the road less travelled arrives at the same spot. Add a habit to already existing habits. Complete overhauls are for condemned houses. You are not a condemned house.

But a decade ago, for one long year, when I looked in the mirror, I saw a one-story ranch home with shag carpeting and wood paneling staring back at me. Yes, I functioned, some might even say "thrived" as a university teacher and scholar, but I had the strong premonition that once the rain came down and the streams rose and the wind beat the sides of this house, the life that I built on sand would fall with a great crash. For that entire year, I was, to loosely quote the last words of Oscar Wilde, in a fight to the death with the wallpaper and one of us had to go.⁶⁶

So, without the luxury of hiring those two attractive and well-known TV celebrities to demolish my life, bequeathing me, after the dust settles, a new home on the same foundation with increased market value, I instead attempted mastery over the rhetorical questioning my mind was plagued by. Had I spent over 20

⁶⁶ Overdramatic? Sure. But you should have seen the wallpaper! Am I mixing too many metaphors? You bet. That's another symptom of midlife crisis. Experiencing it without hyperbole is like asking a teenager in love to refrain from writing really awful poetry. The whole business of feeling your life is a mess, that you are utterly lost, and that time is shorter now than any time in your history has a funny way of stretching thin your powers of personal communication, usually making you incoherent to those who have no experience working in academia.

years in academia only to walk away, empty-handed, perhaps into the sunset but more likely over a cliff? Isn't a (half) life dedicated to the life of mind and great books, if not financially profitable, at least worth a reprieve from clichés like a “midlife crisis?” Is *this* what Odysseus felt when he returned to Ithaca and no one but his poor dog recognized him?⁶⁷

Not having a dog to return to, I instead dedicated my time to identifying the original source of my malaise. After much thought I realized that what was keeping me up at night was a slow-release epiphany, years in the making, about the failures of education and higher learning to train me, really train me, in the pursuit of truth. Yes, a life dedicated to the discovery of knowledge and understanding is a noble pursuit but the institutions I depended on as the foundation for that life were built on quicksand. Though the unity of my midlife crisis could be apprehended *in toto* as a “vocational” crisis, the sinkhole that I saw opened wide before me at 39 had been present, if somewhat hidden, since 18, when I first left home for college.

Perhaps readers are more familiar than they would like to be with the stages of higher education that led me to my midlife crisis. Stage one: high school, the place where inadequate preparation of the fundamentals of fact and good working habits gives birth to elaborate fantasies concerning how college would (finally!) unlock hidden potentialities. Stage two: college, where those looking for truth discover that the four-year, liberal arts degree is neither free (*liberalis*) nor easily

⁶⁷ Answer key: 1. Yes, I had spent most of my life in higher education (not to mention most of my life in school) only to now need to find another place to call home. 2. No, knowledge of the great works of human imagination does not exempt one from experiencing commonplace frustrations like a “midlife crisis.” 3. No. Odysseus knew nothing of the pain of tenure track committees and rejection letters from academic journals. So, comparatively, suitors and sirens aside, he had it easy.

utilized as a skill (*ars*) for practical or intellectual life yet continue to look to the horizon (graduate school) for more time and range to learn what they missed in high school and college. Stage three: graduate school, where the hope to learn what Matthew Arnold called “the best that has been said and thought in the world” is abandoned for specialization and replaced with a desperate hope of landing one of three coveted tenure-track position offered during that academic year.

At every turn, a bait and switch. At every stage of my educational journey, whatever noble ideals I held for the institution were swallowed up by my experience of the institutions’ failure to deliver what I really hoped to achieve: a training in the pursuit of truth and the skills to pass on what I discovered to others. With apologies to Robert Frost, I had believed academia the right place for that since I didn’t know where it was likely to go better. But ten years ago, I stopped believing and began to look for ways *outside* the walls of the academy where the search and sharing of truth might go better. I am happy I did.

Return with me to the familiar highway metaphor I alluded to earlier, a metaphor which touches on possibly the most recognizable analogy in midlife-crisis rhetoric: life as journey. This metaphor is a commonplace but, like many clichés, offers coherence where incoherence threatens to overwhelm us. Few metaphors are as *clarifying* as imaging life as a journey. Think of Dante and the first line of his *Divine Comedy*: “Midway on the journey of our life/I woke to find myself in a dark wood,/for I had wandered off from the straight path”. It is a deceptively simple yet brilliant way of placing the readers into the action of this poem while registering to them the undiluted fact that he considers his prior life before this revealed moment as just plain *wrong*.

Dante’s beginning dramatizes the nightmare fuel that panics the man or woman who experience midlife crisis. The specifics of those crises are variable. Some find they are married to the “wrong” person. Others believe they have chosen the

“wrong” vocation. Sometimes it is a choice made long in the past, the results are only now being strongly, now tragically, felt. But almost all see the dark wood and, if they are smart, ask two questions: how did I get here and how do I get (back) on the right path?⁶⁸

Not everything was crystal clear to me once I had accepted that I would leave my academic post. What *was* clear was that to waste time was to invite more ruin. I did not, like Henry Bemis outside the library after nuclear fallout rejoice “Time enough at last!” No. On the contrary. I knew then that I need to act. Recall the parable of the fig tree from Luke’s gospel:

A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, “Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?” And he answered him, “Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.” (ESV 13:6)

The parable is a warning to recalcitrant high school and college students everywhere. Wasted three years? Better get serious about that major. Haven’t been to Statistics once this semester? Better set the alarm and break the snooze button. But what if you’ve been sleeping for years? And what if the entire town where you live is fast asleep too? The vinedresser seeks to shake us from our slumber. We don’t have much time left. He has made clear the boundaries: one

⁶⁸ In fact, though the fear in me was overpowering, the details of my leaving my profession are unspectacular, all too common, just as “life is a journey” too is commonplace. But if I have a contribution to the midlife crisis as narrative, it would be in pointing out the throughout it all, the “dark wood” which formed the background of my crisis was academia.

more year or else. In his voice echoes the last call of Eliot's bartender in *The Waste Land*: HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME.⁶⁹

Blowing my life up might not have been prudent but it was necessary given the way in which my pursuit of truth within the walls of academia appeared fruitless. I'm not suggesting others follow me or even reject wholesale the traditional institutions of higher learning. But I am much more enthusiastic for the pursuit of truth and the education of the whole person *outside* the walls of the academy. This is why the mission of the Lyceum Institute is so important. Its founders understand how to educate the whole person and how our most important institutions have failed us in that goal. They are building a robust online community to replace the empty halfway houses that litter our academic environment. Their promotion of the centrality of the study of metaphysics and the neglected art of the *Quaestiones Disputatae* seeks to reinvigate our impoverished and ideologically driven schools. They are continually designing a coherent curriculum at the Lyceum to address the educational gaps in our colleges and universities. They grasp the importance of *intellectual habits* and the ways the ancient Trivium can speak to our contemporary challenges. They see that the way forward for higher education needs to articulate the use of digital resources without losing the spontaneous experience of art and culture.

I am convinced that projects like the Lyceum are the way forward for higher education and I am proud to be both a supporter as well as an active participant in its continued growth.

⁶⁹ To be honest, I *did* hang around some more at the bar and order another beer. Instead of running off into the night or checking myself into academic rehab, I emailed the president and dean of faculty and told them I was resigning but not for another year. That way I could act without delay but also participate in a long goodbye. Those last two semesters ended up being my most productive year with students and colleagues but that's another story.

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