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From High in the Paper Tower, An Essay on von Humboldt's University

JOHN HENRY SCHLEGEL†

One of the great questions to be answered in this now no longer brand new century is whether the professionalization of the academic disciplines that accompanied the rise of the bureaucratic university was on balance a good thing or a bad. On the one hand, there is the great expansion of knowledge that has accompanied these two phenomena, joined at the hip as they are. On the other is the denuding of the great expanses of forest and the loss of the hydrocarbons that have provided paper and ink for acres of scholarship that is at best forgettable and at worst . . . well, better not said. Some has been gained, and much lost, in the pursuit of tenure and thereafter of, not even the fifteen minutes of fame that Andy Warhol promised, but of the two and a half minutes that the hottest new idea in any discipline may hope for today.

For many of the post-war years the ticket to tenure and fame in the social sciences was some minor variation on the activity of counting, some new or newly applied mathematical technique or some new subject matter to be counted or better, both. Now, I have nothing against counting, as it is both important to know whether one is talking about one instance, one hundred instances or one hundred thousand of them. Similarly it is important to understand whether the things counted are all instances of the same thing or whether they tend to clump into distinguishable groups.

† Professor of Law, State University of New York at Buffalo, and Roger and Karen Jones Faculty Scholar. This piece is for Al Katz who long ago pointed out to me that the most important use of the verb "think" is in the intransitive. Someone who had listened to my conversations with Guyora, Neil, David, Rebecca, Michael, Peter, Tom, Alex, Fred, Janet, John, Pierre, Rob and Bert could identify fragments of these interchanges in what follows. All have worked to improve this piece, each in his or her own way. I thank my interlocutors for their helpful comments as well as for their patience with my continuing perversity. That also would scream loudly to such a listener.

But counting and clumping have their limits, as do all techniques of inquiry. And so, quite soon, diminishing returns set in, not the least due to the fact that if one has to count and clump, then one can only ask questions for which counting and clumping are an even vaguely plausible activity. Thus constricting the knowable is, of course, one of the great risks of professionalization of any kind.

The tiresomeness of the production of orderly rows of neatly counted and clumped scholarship led some people to feel a breath (and breadth) of fresh air in the French scholarship that wafted across the Atlantic about twenty-five years ago. First seen in the humanities, it then advanced into law, and finally colonized the social sciences. Why this body of scholarship was called post-modern is not at all obvious. After all, the relevant books largely exemplified the application of enlightenment critique to the objects and categories of thought, and so of language itself, an activity that is as post-modern as Descartes and Kant. Granted, Descartes and Kant attempted to ground thought in one way or another and the new French guys celebrated the ungroundedness of thought with equal intensity. But such quibbles about the branding of an attitude aside, this scholarship turned Derrida and Foucault into buzz words in the brief span of fifteen years, always a bad sign. Fairly soon everything was being problematized and play could be seen everywhere. As the song goes, "Everything old was new again."

Then, with an astonishing rapidity, what was initially fresh air turned into a verbal fog. Within a half generation the carnivalesque, with its overtones of licentiousness and frivolity, became the transgressiveness of almost anything including, I suppose, a harried junior naval officer's hiding marbles in the captain's overhead and throwing his potted palm overboard.¹ "Progressive" came to mean anything that I like that most other people don't. And so, a wonderful world of new possibilities turned into an academic industry of rendering once well understood human activities into an otherworldly language that made such activities seem more mysterious, and less funny, than Mork going off to the

1. This is vaguely the plot of "Mister Roberts," a wonderful 1955 film about life on a World War II supply ship, that starred James Cagney, Henry Fonda, Jack Lemmon, and William Powell. Lemmon received an Oscar for his performance as the junior naval officer.

grocery store to buy a loaf of bread.² Somehow Foucault's basic insight that, as my former colleague, Al Katz, once put it to me, the milk does not have to be in the dairy case at the grocery store; it could be with the beverages, with the cola and the beer—or to say it more formally, that no position on any subject could be taken as obvious, but all positions need to be explicitly defended—became something quite different. The idea that even our conventions require a defense was somehow converted into the assumption that any assertion outside the mainstream needed no more defense than that it was outside the mainstream. The notion that things might be otherwise became the notion that good reasons need be supplied only for the status quo, which was by definition not progressive, and that it was an author's special, social position that made the progressive, progressive, as if the authority of social position were not the previously offered justification for slavery, coverture and suffrage limited to substantial property holders.

What, if anything, does all this mean for Wilhelm von Humboldt's idea of the University? Answering such a question requires first a brief review of that idea. Von Humboldt, a member of the minor German nobility, was a philologist who became the Prussian equivalent of minister of education during 1809-10. As such he was responsible for planning what became known as the University of Berlin. His plans emphasized the importance of *Wissenschaft*, of science seen as objective and scholarly knowledge about the worlds of nature and of human affairs. *Wissenschaft*, understood as an activity, was conceived of as part of a lifelong process of *Bildung*, of reaching an individual's intellectual and moral, that is human, potential, a potential that was conceived of as encompassing the ideal of the cultivated man, and so, in a fully social and political context. What was new in von Humboldt's idea of a University was the assertion that the ideal of *Bildung* could be realized by a broadening and deepening of the University's traditional tasks of providing professional or vocational training, by teaching all of the sciences that could be

2. In the late 1970s to early 1980s sit-com, "Mork and Mindy," Robin Williams played Mork, a naive alien who lived with a single female, Mindy, and explored her world in bits and pieces by engaging in the most mundane of activities. In so doing Williams gently highlighted the absurdity of contemporary social conventions.

presented *wissenschaftlich*. Professors were to be free of state interference as they sought and conveyed knowledge (*Lehrfreiheit*) and students were similarly to be free to pursue their studies as they wished (*Lernfreiheit*). However, the efforts of both professor and student, though separate in that each is individually animated by the pursuit *Bildung*, were together directed toward the objective cultivation of *Wissenschaft* in the "deepest and widest sense" understood as focused on "knowledge as a not yet wholly solved problem" that therefore required continuous "investigation and research."³ Stripped of its Germanic verbal fog, in von Humboldt's University scholars, independently acting as such, would engage in research—the continuous, rigorous, and precise examination of phenomena in the world designed to disclose the truth, seen as a unity, about that world—and teach the results of that research to students who similarly were independently attempting to develop an understanding of the world as part of realizing their full potential as citizens embedded in a social and political context. Implicitly, the activity of each depended on the exercise of an innate curiosity about the world.

How this idea has fared over time is a separate matter.⁴ Creating an institution that would specialize in the scientific, that is rational (after all von Humboldt was a philologist) study of the phenomena of the universe made real

3. See HUMANIST WITHOUT PORTFOLIO, AN ANTHOLOGY OF THE WRITINGS OF WILHELM VON HUMBOLDT 132, 132-33. (Marianne Cowan trans., Wayne State Univ. Press 1963). "Über die innere and äussere Organization de höheren wissenschaftlichen Anstalten zu Berlin," *Gesammelte Schriften* (Herausgegeben von der Koniglich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften) (Berlin: B. Behr's Verlag, 1903), pp.250-260. *University Reform in Germany - On the Spirit and the Organizational Framework of Intellectual Institutions in Berlin* 8 MINERVA 242, 242 n.3 (E. Skills trans., 1970). "Wissenschaft," "Bildung," "Lehrfreiheit," and "Lernfreiheit" are terms that do not translate easily into English the meaning of which have been fought over for many years. Indeed, von Humboldt's prose does not translate easily into English as can be seen from comparing the translation above with the complete translation. See *id.* at 242-250. For some understanding of the context of these ideas, see PAUL R. SWEET, 2 WILHELM VON HUMBOLDT: A BIOGRAPHY 3-71 (1980).

4. Neil Duxbury calls me up short for providing an historical and sociological account of the fate of von Humboldt's idea in the United States, but not an intellectual one. The complaint is well taken. I have chosen this course of action because I believe that, in the States at least, this idea has had been largely deployed as a Christmas tree decoration for presidential and decanal prose. Proving this proposition would require much more space that the essay form can tolerate.

sense in the early nineteenth century. The opening of much of the world to European exploration and study promised a vast expansion of European knowledge, a promise that was realized for the people there. It was an idea that had some traction, even as late as the middle of the twentieth century, when Robert Maynard Hutchins, no longer president of the University of Chicago, still trumpeted as the University's project "round[ing] out the circle of knowledge."⁵

But, by Hutchins' time, von Humboldt's idea had already run into trouble on this side of the Atlantic, though it is not clear that any one thing caused the trouble. Science as rational ordering—the sense in which chemistry, law, philology and zoology were all sciences—a kind of gentleman's learning, never fit terribly well with the modestly democratic ethos of the now forcibly United States. Our late nineteenth century economic expansion brought with it an increase in white collar managerial jobs that provided an avenue to middle class social status in addition to the one provided by the traditional professions of law, medicine and theology. The resulting expansion of the middle class slowly altered the social significance of higher education from a none too serious privilege of an already acknowledged elite to a somewhat more serious credential that established membership in the now more numerous lower reaches of that elite.

The expansion of the size of institutions of higher education that accompanied the expansion of the middle class meant that there could no longer be but a single professor of any subject. This expansion, plus the offering of elective courses and even majors, resulted in the multiplication of professors and lesser folk and led to the creation of the bureaucratic entities that are departments, designed for the coordination of instruction in an area of learning. The importation of the Germanic idea of the necessity for a teacher to acquire advanced training in a subject before being allowed to teach it to others, led to the establishment of the specialized Ph.D. degree in this country. This addition of graduate training to the traditional college fair further allowed the now larger departments to submit to their urge to gather in specialized sub-groupings of their

5. Robert M. Hutchins, *The University Law School*, in *THE LAW SCHOOL OF TOMORROW: THE PROJECTION OF AN IDEAL* 5, 13 (David Harber & Julius Cohen eds., 1968).

similarly inclined brethren. (There were very few sistren.) Then, the now invariable list of professional organizations such as the American Political Science Association or the American Sociological Association emerged, and thereafter came the specialized journals for the publication of the knowledge acquired by the members of this now more numerous, more tightly grouped, more highly educated collection of individuals.

All of these changes interacted so that, by the end of the First World War, the once small, religiously affiliated college, which in its separate way maintained von Humboldt's commitment to an education appropriate to the cultivated man, had either forsaken that path and become a modest university, or forsworn such an alteration of its scope and purpose, either in the name of piety or of liberal education. During the same years, the small state university had begun its pattern of slow growth into a somewhat academic institution that delivered credentials to the children of the middle class and some support to state interests by focusing on agriculture, commerce and engineering. Equally importantly, it allowed, by somewhat constraining, the high jinx that littered the road to maturity and ensured that late adolescent mating rituals would take place in a largely safe, because predominately rural, environment, away from parental embarrassment. All such institutions reached a form that we would recognize today—departmental organization in terms of what were generally conceded to be separate disciplines.

These same changes supported the professionalization process in academia, a process integral to the establishment of a modestly secure middle class status in general and academic autonomy, the American version of *Lehrfreiheit*, called academic freedom, in particular. This process is almost timeless, appearing earlier in the establishment of the merchant and craft guilds that provided the economic base for a middle class existence of their members, the original bourgeoisie, at the time of the growth of European towns in the twelfth through fifteenth centuries. And it is simple to describe. Identify a subject matter that is different from those claimed by others; exclude the amateurs from the group, either with state sanction or with group defined educational qualifications or better, both; establish a set of categories that are the intellectual project; and

finally claim a distinctive method or approach to the subject matter.

Academics in the natural sciences, social sciences and humanities all followed this recipe. Doing so made a certain amount of sense. Academics are not all created equal, but like most humans have different talents. As my colleague, Fred Konefsky, offered, once he could hit a fastball, but he never could throw one. Similarly, while I can understand modern genetics and even find it fascinating, I lack the physical dexterity and the patience to do the lab work that such a research topic requires. Each discipline gathers those with similar talents and creates a market for those talents, as it were. Thus, participation in a discipline as a unit of organization became the lowest common denominator for the odd collection of separately talented individuals gathered in the university. It became the common ground from which the claim of self-governance, of independence from the State, that is at the root of any profession, might be asserted, however lamely, in such pointless bodies as the "Academic Senate."

This professionalization process has been endlessly repeated. Lawyers did it; doctors did it; morticians did it. Today teeth cleaners and nurserymen are doing it, not to mention the long standing efforts of electricians, carpenters and plumbers. Each group attempts to establish some control over the price of its members' services by differentiating product, excluding some people who might purport to do the work, and claiming some distinctive knowledge, preferably buttressed with an assertedly distinctive method. Price control is, after all, the economic basis of a middle class social existence, and the lack of price control is what distinguishes the middle from the working class.

I see little reason to denigrate the professionalization process. While there is much that is silly about what that process has become—"professional" seems to have evolved into meaning a somewhat dodgy "good," as in a massage professional, a pest removal professional or a professional model—the social effects surely have been positive overall. There is nothing wrong with giving workers, however humble, a sense that they occupy a valued place in the division of labor. Similarly, the broadened middle class that has accompanied professionalization is likely to have been a significant component in the maintenance and extension of democratic government, however imperfect. And the proc-

ess has provided effective support for redistributive taxation, given that only in the broad middle class are there enough marginal dollars to make redistribution effective.

Where academic matters are concerned, however, professionalization has proven to be more troublesome. Von Humboldt's vision of the University was driven by a faith in the intellectual curiosity of both faculty and students. It staked its claim to relatively autonomous self-government, to its independence from the State, on the notion that, driven by faculty and student curiosity about the world, the University's researches would lead to truths that would then be taught to the citizenry. Such was a plausible claim in the nineteenth century. It was even a plausible claim through the first half of the twentieth century. And the existence of the claim made it easier for the notion of a discipline housed in a separate department to spread throughout the academy, replacing armchair speculation with more solid facts, if not necessarily better interpretations. Whole areas of knowledge were transformed, particularly in the sciences, and to a lesser extent in the social sciences and humanities.

At the same time however, the agreed understandings in the disciplines that made possible the significant growth of knowledge began to limit the intellectual curiosity of the members of the discipline. The very process of forging agreement on the subject matter and method in a discipline served to place certain topics, certain ways of thinking, certain understandings or interpretations, certain categories, outside the discipline. As a social matter, how this constriction of the knowable took place is quite obvious. Membership in a group, participation in a discipline, was established by exclusion, by a kind of intellectual policing, for it is what we are *not* that defines what we are.

Subtle hints that others ought to become *au courant* or leave could, if necessary, be followed by a certain amount of bullying, all in the name of disciplinary imperatives. This was because those who did not submit to the tenets of the discipline obviously were not a part of the discipline, not a part of the club. And so "discipline" began to refer to both a way of thinking and, at the same time, those who thought that way. Those who thought otherwise simply were no longer there. Those who in the future might similarly be inclined to stray from accepted paths, likewise could be harried back to, or excluded from, the herd.

This ritual of setting ourselves off from others was surely understandable at the outset, when the professionalization project was so new and shaky. Without rules establishing our separateness, it was impossible to identify what we were and what that being stood for. It was impossible to get the university to set up a proper department that we controlled. It was impossible to gather together publicly to celebrate the achievement that was the establishment of a discipline at an annual meeting of those who shared the knowledge produced by the discipline's members. It was impossible to welcome new members to the group, to socialize them, in both senses, into the discipline.

At a time when it was generally agreed that the point of research was the delineation of truth, the act of exclusion, the demarcation of what was known because correctly established through the process of group affirmation by the insiders, a process that became known by the revealing term "peer review," could be, and was, justified by its ends, the truth obtained. After all, charity in the face of error is an unusual virtue. Truth, like group identity, can only be discovered as error is identified. But as the twentieth century wore on the notion that disciplinary activity is about the delineation of truth became increasingly untenable in all sorts of areas of learning.

The crumbling of the rock of truth on which von Humboldt's University, and so disciplinary separateness, was built, infected physics early on when first, Einstein's theory of relativity made people worry about the fixity of space and time, and then, Heisenberg's famous, if not well understood, uncertainty principle made even Einstein invoke God and dice. That the knowledge of physics, the material base of our universe, was based in situatedness, and so necessarily implied partiality, and with partiality, error, is the conclusion that many drew from Einstein and Heisenberg. If this assertion were correct, then the one thing that the University did not produce was truth.

The consequences of such a conclusion somewhat unexpectedly appeared first in anthropology. That discipline's postulate of cultural relativism brought forth acres of religious or socially conservative objections that allowed the academics to feel superior to Mencken's "booboisie." Unfortunately, such a feeling of superiority allowed these same academics to ignore an equally obvious implication from cultural relativism; academics' knowledge itself was no less

socially limited to the members of their several exotic tribes. Luckily, or maybe not, the hot war against fascism and the cold war against communism served to mute this dispute with the citizenry, as well as to hide the broader challenge that indeterminacy posed to the social edifice that was von Humboldt's University.

Then, with the return of the GI's from World War II and, remarkably soon thereafter, the explosion of the student body in the sixties and early seventies that was their children, came the great expansion of the university. Its size grew apace and with that growth came a style of academic self-promotion, the incessant effort to create fame, that brought successive waves of change to the disciplines and so magnified the inevitable politics in each. Accompanying this growth were the first signs of indeterminacy's reappearance. It started with the discussion of Kuhn's work in the history of the physical sciences. Questions about the relevance of this work for the social sciences soon followed. Many academic intellectuals vicariously participated in debate over Kuhn's ideas by partisans of Lakatos or Popper or, even worse, advocated Feyerabend's criticisms of both. About the same time came the general leftward drift of the academy following the Vietnam War. This drift was accompanied by strident assertions that the old people in various disciplines had shaped their scholarship—trimmed here, expanded there—for political reasons. Unfortunately, the sensible discussion of these issues got lost in the continuing, understandable, perhaps even necessary, but nevertheless ancillary, disputes that surrounded the great explosion of female membership in the academic fraternity and the lesser, but still contentious, increase in Black and Hispanic membership.

The model of knowing that the academy eventually arrived at in response to these political/social pressures and intellectual disputes was one of the inclusion of perspectives, a kaleidoscopic vision of truth. If, on any issue, enough perspectives could be brought to bear—ethnic, gender, class, sexual, geographic, human, ecological, species transcendent and then their various cross specificities—somehow the academy could still assert the universality of its knowledge. And fancy French theory was deployed in support of this vision (as well as full employment for humanist scholars). Socially constructed understandings sprouted in every little intellectual garden. As seldom was

heard the terrible "T" word, the skies were not cloudy all day.

Whether this vision of scholarship in the academy was based on a plausible use of the relevant French learning is not a particularly important question. For some it worked. Everything could go on as before. The University, in the guise of the "multiversity," could continue to educate the children of the middle class and a modest number of working class aspirants. Departments could continue to be the administrative units for personnel and degree granting purposes. The disciplines, and so their vision of proper preparation for work in a field, could continue to be the intellectual building blocks of knowledge, tempered by assertions of the need for inter-disciplinary teams to investigate certain problems, for inter-disciplinary perspectives to be brought to bear in certain courses, and for thoroughgoing inter-disciplinarity in any thoroughly post-modern scholar.

To many it seemed as if von Humboldt's idea of the University, now reimagined as the multiversity's inter-disciplinary interrogation of socially constructed practice, was doing quite fine. Few noticed that there was more than a little *legerdemain*, play as it were, in this defense of von Humboldt's idea. The multiversity had completely forgotten the generous, even free-floating, curiosity at the root of von Humboldt's vision of the University. The invocation of inter-disciplinarity largely remained an assertion of the centrality of the disciplinary organization of the universe of knowledge that earlier was the basis of the claim of any university to be the University. It was only from a disciplinary redoubt that we would be, that we could ever identify, the inter-disciplinary. And so the call for inter-disciplinary scholarship was little more than the continuing assertion of separation, a repetitive walling off of other disciplinary perspectives, a quarantining of a potentially destructive virus. Inter-disciplinary scholarship was fine, but recognition within the discipline was what really counted. After all, it was the discipline that gave one a professional identity from which one could be inter-disciplinary. It was the discipline that made one an academic, a person in the all-knowing eye of scholarship. No one could be a professional inter-disciplinarian.⁶

6. The proliferation of centers or institutes for the study of whatever does

Although the tension inherent in a multi-disciplinarity that proceeds from a disciplinary bastion was apparent to all who chose to see, few made that choice. Only loonies could conceive of an a-disciplinarity, a refusal to recognize disciplinary boundaries, particularly those of subject and method, coupled with a refusal to worry about a scholar's standpoint or grounding for speech. Such marginal individuals pointed to the implausibility of any special claim to knowing anywhere in the academy, turned social construction back on the disciplines, and found them wanting, as little more than administrative conveniences for distributing paychecks and routing the mail. But almost all academics recognized that it would be crazy to push fancy French theory so far as to undermine the singular claims to knowing made by individual disciplines and so by the University. Without the structuring of knowing that was provided by the disciplines, no one would ever be sure that their work or anyone else's was really good, and without such knowledge all would have to face the possibility of living a working life without meaning, as well as the constant risk of being exposed as a fraud. Even if successful in avoiding the embarrassment of exposure, all would have to face the possibility of obscurity, even intellectual death. Scholars might have to pay health insurance, mortgage installments and college tuition from earnings as a public intellectual and so have to have really good, or at least salable, ideas on a very regular basis. Worse still, they would

not undermine the point. They are classic bureaucratic solutions to ordinary bureaucratic problems, generally created for one of two reasons. The most common is to take advantage of some perceived funding stream—either funding agency or donor supplied. These creations ossify like crazy as funder's priorities change and so university administrators fight tooth and nail to shut them down because they all come with a requirement for scarce university overhead dollars. The second is to shut whiners up. University administrators are content to let these remain in place so long as the whiners are a problem. In both cases a significant force driving the establishment of such entities is the vanity of the actual or putative *grosse machers* on the faculty, as Peter Goodrich reminds me.

There are oddities such as the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought that persist for a long time after having been set up. When they persist it is usually because they have degree-granting ability that centers or institutes traditionally lack. Graduate students in centers or institutes more commonly are remitted to the underlying disciplines for certification. And so these entities recapitulate the centrality of the disciplinary organization of knowledge that is so obvious in the case of inter-disciplinary scholarship generally.

be seen as amateurs and so risk falling back into the working class.

I am not at all sure that these risks of abandoning the institutionalized disciplines are real or that they outweigh the possible benefits of throwing off the tyranny of established ways of knowing.⁷ However, I can understand their apparent weight. Consider the most obvious risk—intellectual security. The university is a comfortable bureaucracy, not an ivory, but a paper tower. Oh, yes, we rail about the university bureaucracy all the time, but such is the coffee talk of all knowledge workers who participate in work groups larger than one or who have to interact with any organization larger than the neighborhood dry cleaner. Within the university a discipline is a comfortable bureaucracy as well. Both the university and the discipline tell us what is right to do; both insulate us from having to exercise personal judgment when it is painful or even when not painful, but simply a distraction from our work. “The university requires” is an easy way to dispose of difficult questions of judgment posed by students. Similarly, “this is a hot topic” and “this is how it is done in my discipline” are easy ways to dispose of difficult questions about what research to do and how to undertake that research. Curiosity may be channeled, but the risk of paralysis, of not knowing what to do in a world of possibilities, is dampened and so security, enhanced.

Disciplinarily founded locutions such as the foregoing are comfortable because it is even difficult to understand what personal judgment entails. As is often the case with virtues, personal judgment is most easily understood by looking at what it is not. It is not the repetition of whatever is the accepted wisdom in the field, even though that is often the easiest possible fall back position. Similarly, it is not replying, “well, then, I guess that’s OK after all” when confronted with a teen’s statement, “but all the other kids are allowed to do it!” in the middle of an argument over tattoos, nipple rings, driving a thousand miles alone or joining the co-ed naked volleyball team. True, all judgment

7. I am not here or elsewhere advocating the abandonment of tenure in the form of employment security. The question of employment security should be seen as entirely separate from the way that tenure *in a university*, unfortunately seen as tenure *in a discipline*, not just allows, but forces a narrowing of available scholarly perspectives.

implies a frame of reference, but *pace* Stanley Fish and even T. S. Eliot talking about "Tradition and the Individual Talent," personal judgment need not be constrained by a single accepted frame of reference, by any single discipline. Because most humans participate in activities that provide separate, sometime overlapping, sometimes not, frames of reference, they may combine these frames in ways that can vary from obvious syncretism to real novelty. We call such exercises of synthesis creativity and even evidence of a playfulness of mind. Can they lead into solipsism? Surely. Can bureaucratic forces within or without the university turn them into *dreck*? Of course. But neither the possibilities of solipsism nor the likelihood of *dreck* provide a satisfactory argument for the impossibility of exercising personal judgment.

Still, even when one understands what personal judgment is, such judgment is hard to exercise. None of us is trained to do so even in those modest areas where such training might be possible. Indeed, the absence of such training is why, when we raise children, we talk endlessly on the phone with those who have done so before and not had things turn out too badly. It is why we read all of those child rearing books that both advise new parents and simultaneously create anxiety with their tales of normal development. Judgment leaves us naked in public. Sexy dressing is fine. Buff, maybe even better. But naked in public is at its best a dream of unpreparedness for an exam hiding other worries about other unpreparednesses. At its worst, public nakedness is an offense to good taste. Hell, even private nakedness leaves us vulnerable enough once lust is satiated. And so, not surprisingly, it is in private, in the dark of night, where exercises of judgment most haunt us.

To exercise judgment is to be an adult, a hard job in a society that perpetuates dependency until anything between 16 and God knows when. And academic institutions are anything but adult making. Graduate education somehow creates dependency in the name of producing independent scholars. One is always left as child to parent with respect to one's dissertation advisor, to the doctor father, as the Germans tellingly put it. Peer judgment in the discipline, most often essential to grant seekers—and in the multiversity who is not?—and always essential to a researcher seeking any but vanity press publication, is

valued over personal judgment. And in some areas peer judgment even reduces the role of the journal editor to some combination of an election clerk and a high school guidance counselor. In a lingeringly post-adolescent world, it is not surprising that becoming a fully adult member of an academic institution, achievement of the wonderfully revealing "full" professorship, often doesn't come until 40, or maybe never. Prolonged dependency, all of this time under the surveillance of others in a panopticon without walls, does not make the exercise of judgment easy.

Consider only the intellectual possibilities that straying from peer judgment call up. If we exercise personal judgment in intellectual matters, measure our discipline's categories, find them wanting and substitute categories of our own choosing, we court social obscurity and intellectual death. What if no one understands? What if no one reads because no one will publish? What if even internet publication becomes a fanzine with an audience of none, an occasional eyeball, but no responses? After all, in the multiversity knowledge is accumulated for the purpose of publication. In that world, scholarship is only implausibly knowledge if no one else reads it, no one else finds it illuminating, no one else believes it, no one else helps to extend it.

Working within a discipline thus both removes some of the terror from the exercise of judgment and of the accompanying vision of social obscurity and intellectual death, whatever the actual social and intellectual circumstances of a particular scholar may be. For such a scholar participation in a discipline, especially when sharing a method, provides a modestly impersonal way of recognizing my group and yours in the bureaucratic structure that is any university. In theory at least, it provides a similarly impersonal way of recognizing quality scholarship, though this theory is not well supported in fact, but then human institutions are like that. The discipline provides a ready, if not willing, audience for one's work while cabining that work in comfortable ways. Unfortunately, as it does so, it significantly contracts the knowable, significantly dampens omnivorous curiosity. For by making some knowledge possible through the establishment of a shared system of categories, it makes other knowledge unavailable.⁸

8. John Portmann, has pointed out that there is a certain irony in my facile deployment of the insights of a stream of twentieth century philosophy that has

That unavailability is before our eyes every day with the wondrous locutions that we develop to get around the tyranny of our category systems. Consider historical sociology or legal anthropology or economic geography. Each is both a recognized sub-discipline and a tombstone to the inability of the parent discipline graciously to accommodate certain inquiries. Sociology is and always will be primarily the study of present society; real anthropology studies exotic peoples who by definition do not have the law we take seriously; geography is about extension in space no matter what others say.

Sometimes such hybridization will not work. Cell and molecular biology simply split off from the parent tree, as has ecology. Marxist economics demonstrates a circumstance where a walling-off was necessary to maintain the integrity of a category system and is accepted as such. However, sometimes a potential category can't be made to fit within the system, but unfortunately addresses problems that are not so important as to necessitate formation of a separate discipline or so threatening as to call for a walling-off. Consider Buddhist law, a category that is impossible to fit in any of the many already homeless, area studies non-disciplines, and would draw on non-western theology as well.

Closer to my home there is the first year of law school, a set of categories that demonstrates exactly how a category system makes certain knowledge impossible. Consider courses in bureaucracy or civil liability. The first would highlight the commonalties between institutions as disparate as the courts, corporations, administrative agencies, and law offices. It would make available to study the ways that order is maintained through structure and procedure. Civil liability would highlight the role of state recognized understanding in tort, contract, and property in a way that would undermine the foundational significance of those

had for its mission the demarcation of the knowable as part of an argument against a more general disciplinarily based constriction of the knowable. Although one might attribute such a juxtaposition to rampant post-modernism, it would be more accurate to attribute it to my outrage that well paid, tenure protected individuals are so insecure in their personal identity that they need to support it with a professional, disciplinary identity that places off limits knowledge that is most likely well within the philosophically appropriate bounds. *Lehrfreiheit* is a license to dream. It should not be confused with a sinecure from a dozing Prussian king.

categories. At the same time it would make available to direct study the way that social/political understandings of appropriate behavior shape legal rule systems over large swaths of the law, but render separate normative study of the once separate subjects an antiquarian luxury. Neither can be drawn out of the currently canonical courses, except interstitially. Both make those courses in a real sense irrelevant.

I do not purport to know what knowledge has been lost because the current organization of the university is in terms of the canonical disciplines. In a philosophical sense no one could know. From within the university the best that can be said is, "maybe a little; maybe a lot." On the positive side, disciplines do provide useful categories and clearly, thought is impossible without categories. Indeed, whatever might seem to have been the case for Kant, for many, critique seems impossible without a disciplinary foundation. However, on the negative side, a question remains about the degree to which it makes any sense to anchor the possibilities of knowing in the social forms that are the disciplines once the claim of the University, von Humboldt's University, to knowing and teaching the truth about the universe of possible knowledge, however comfortable, is at best dubiously tenable. After all, it has become reasonably clear that in one way Popper won his argument with Kuhn: We can establish error, though only weakly in many areas, but never truth.

Obviously the university can proceed as the multiversity, holding on to its kaleidoscope, even enjoying the changing colors as funder's or disciplinary interests cause the lens to turn. It can ignore the implausibility of the rock—truth—that was its foundation for the foreseeable future. Human institutions survive on the basis of implausible justifications all the time. The market has long been justified by the notion that it brings choice to consumers, even though it radically narrows choice to those things that can in fact be purchased. The state has long claimed that it works for the good of the people, even though it pays only modest attention to any segment of the people other than the upper classes, the subjects of law, as opposed to the lower classes, its objects. So the question remains open: is it appropriate for an institution that claims that the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge is its purpose to continue to organize that process on the basis of a social

formation that by definition makes some knowledge impossible to acquire?

This question should not be understood as one of university administration. Even a small public high school needs some structure between the teachers and the principal. A contemporary university needs more layers of organization than such a school, to be sure. Departments are a useful intermediate organizational form. However, departments do not need to track the disciplines. They could be organized as intentional communities, groups that come together for so long as they share a common topic, without regard to method or approach. Such an organization would not imply the institutionalization of a kind of Maoist perpetual revolution. We have that already, courtesy of the mayflies of the academy and their search for Warholian fame. We do not need more of the same. Rather, such an organization implies a choice to give up on authoritative understandings and so on revolutions altogether. It implies the end of such intellectual bullying by eliminating the basis for authoritative judgment.

Intentional departments could offer majors and grant degrees, even the vaunted Ph.D. They might be the situs for hiring new faculty and preparing cases for tenure, though, given their possible ephemerality, the decision-making might be more of a university function, as was the case in the von Humboldt's University before disciplinary/departmental organization became the norm. Departments still would be a place to get mail and a paycheck, a place from which to offer classes, change health insurance, play politics and grouse about one's colleagues. But such departments would be organized for this day and this train only, good only so long as there was something beyond inertia holding them together. Students would still learn, as they always have learned, what they wish to learn and no more. They might undertake majors or not, just as faculty might join a department or not, choosing instead to pick up a paycheck at Human Resources and mail at the Post Office.

Would most people, students and teachers, embrace this freedom? I rather doubt it. However, some would be free from an intellectual ordering that they find less than compelling and therefore tyrannical, and the university would be a trifle more honest in its stance toward the world. But, many would forgo such freedom and instead go

on much as before. After all, exercising personal judgment, putting one's ass on the line, is scary. In intellectual matters it forces one to face the possibility that one has nothing to say and wants to say it anyway. In the dark of night that could be a significant cost to an accompanying freedom. One would need to weigh such a cost carefully.

On the other hand, any purported cost in terms of social security, of insulation from the fear of becoming working class or a hungry public intellectual is likely to be ephemeral. The middle class needs a mark to establish its children's class membership. Similarly, it wants a place to park its children for some period of time that would allow them to grow up, preferably one that would allow parents to see no evil, hear no evil and speak no evil. And their kids also want to be parked. After between thirteen and eighteen years on a routinely boring, parentally overseen academic treadmill, a worry free college life of booze, sex, and occasionally entertaining classes must seem like nirvana.

Today the middle class is as willing as ever to pay the university's fee, even though most know that what they are paying for is of dubious value, apart from the credential provided. It will continue to pay for this credential tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, just as it once paid for the grand tour, as implausible a basis for demarking class membership as a major in art history, criminal justice, or aerospace engineering. So long as a piece of paper comes out at the end, payment will continue. It may even be better that the topic attached to the degree be seen as frivolous—the twelfth century, prokaryotic cells, alchemy. Such frivolity allows parents to feel put upon, always useful in the inevitable fights over attention, behavior and becoming a productive member of society. And it allows the university to justify the price that it charges for the relevant credential since, lord knows, the more esoteric the topic, the less likely an understanding of it can be procured elsewhere for less.⁹

9. The tug of war between parents' acceptance of the undergraduate degree as a credential showing membership in the middle class and their deeply held desire to secure employment for their children seems to be playing itself out with the growth of the terminal masters degree. University administration gets an extra year or two of tuition, while parents get some "practical" training for their children. The accompanying complaints from faculty in the arts and sciences departments about the devaluation of the role of their graduate programs, which is to say their role in dispensing Ph.D. degrees, and so

So, it would seem that the macro-social constraints on abandoning the disciplinary organization of knowledge in the university are not likely to be overwhelming. The micro-social constraints are another matter. Being an academic is a piece of the division of labor. It is a job, cleaner than many, less lucrative than some, but not obviously more rewarding than lots of others. Academics have taken this job because they once believed that it suited their talents, just as have butchers, bakers, and now again candlestick makers. And like those jobs, it is anything but always rewarding. It is dispiriting, to say the least, regularly to attempt to teach something to a group of individuals many, perhaps most, of whom would not be there listening (assuming that they are, often a necessary self-delusion) were it possible to become or remain middle class in some other way. Scholarship is not all that it is cracked up to be either. The fear that most people are ignoring, or worse laughing at, ones latest publication is anything but uncommon, even among academics firmly anchored in a discipline. Shifts in scholarly fashion that threaten to make ones embedded intellectual capital worthless are dreaded by youth, as well as age. And much university service is properly given over to those who "place a low value on their time, and rightly so," as a colleague once observed.

Though I write with a certain amount of dogged hope, a sense that academic professionalization has had costs, but that its costs need not be a permanent drag on life in the multiversity that von Humboldt's University has become, my belief that things in the university might be different does not mean that they will be different. Indeed, where human institutions are concerned it is always sensible to bet against significant change. So, it is time to draw up an account, to measure the plausibility of my dogged hope.

Such an account would look at two complexes of entries. One would be the university's delivery of education, its teaching mission, and its delivery of credentials, its social mission. The other complex would be its efforts toward

reproducing themselves, are growing in volume. Simultaneously, one would expect that, in the humanities and social sciences, the result of increasing numbers of masters candidates, whose presence undermines the separate specialness of departmental graduate programs, would be the growth of the post-doctoral fellowship that is now all but required for a teaching post in the natural sciences. Unfortunately, such fellowships are already institutionalized at Starbucks or high end restaurants.

scholarship and intellectual achievement. One may be done well while the other is done poorly, though in evaluating both it is important to remember that academics are humans, despite their children's and student's belief to the contrary, and so a certain tolerance for human frailty is in order.

As to the first complex, that of teaching and credentialing, I deeply dislike the waste of students' time in classes given by individuals who are, at best, content to regurgitate the current wisdom of the discipline and at worst, too dispirited to care. Still, it would be foolish to fail to recognize that in the last fifty years the university has been a more than modest step in the direction of extending criteria for social advancement beyond proximity to elite birth. Indeed, measured against the usual progress, a word I choose carefully, of human institutions, it has been successful beyond reasonable expectations, however much further we might think that it needs to go in this direction. Here the university has a significant credit balance.

As to the second complex, that of scholarship and intellectual advance, the matter is more mixed. The waste of natural resources that is the mediocrity, or worse, of much scholarly output in any discipline is unbelievable, though it would be more charitable for me to remember that the quality of scholarship in any discipline is likely to be normally distributed and so, much of it, by definition, mediocre and some of it, worse. It would be more charitable still to note that the knowledge that the disciplines have accumulated is more a modest positive monument to the human spirit, and less an example of human folly, than its pointless inanities in fields such a law would make it seem. Honesty then would force me to admit that here too the university has a credit balance, though a smaller one.

If the university's balance then is positive, if giving in to dispiriting fears by trusting the discipline to provide guidance and maybe, just maybe, a dollop of approbation for one's efforts, may help an academic to keep on trying in the classroom and in the quiet of the office, then why has the color of my presentation been so resolutely gray, my tone so infused with the hollow sadness of the English horn. It is not because I wish that teaching or writing, much less thinking (should it actually occur), would stop. Anything but. Rather, I see gray and hear the English horn because, despite the university's positive balance, at its root our

practice is based on a significant, hopefully not intentional, misunderstanding.

Despite university administrators' constant carping to the contrary, the job of thinking and the job of credentialing are in no sense the same job. They are quite different. Foucault and his French compatriots were important first for bringing to our attention an understanding of how categories work and second for focusing our minds on power, and so derivatively, on increasing and diversifying the middle class. The academy by and large learned the second lesson well. We did less well with the first lesson. Endlessly focusing on categories, on positionality, on the distribution of power, we continued to confuse scholarship, a disciplinary activity, with thinking, with curiosity about the world. We used a deep understanding of the process of knowing that French scholarship provided to continue to instantiate ways of knowing that this understanding was designed to critique. This is not thinking. "Think" is best understood as an intransitive verb.¹⁰

Academics are highly privileged members of a privileged class. At bottom the deal that we made when becoming part of the contemporary embodiment of von Humboldt's University is that we would perform a socially valuable credentialing task in exchange for time to think, to let our curiosity about the world run free, and a significant, though hardly complete, protection from adverse personal consequences that might flow from our thought. We have done reasonably well at credentialing and the university has done reasonably well at providing protection. But for an highly trained and possibly over privileged elite we have done piss poor at thinking. Oh, we speak of how demeaning it is to our role as thinkers to have to credential the middle class and we talk endlessly as if our scholarship consisted only of bombs well thrown at creaking social and intellectual edifices. But the disciplinarily formulaic in all its

10. For all of those who did not have Miss Nellie Clark, or some kindred spirit, for eleventh grade, I provide the following grammatical aid: An intransitive verb does not require an object; a transitive verb does. In the sentence, "He runs," meaning he is a runner, "run" is used as an intransitive verb. In contrast, in the sentence, "He runs to mother," "run" is used as a transitive verb. Intransitive verbs as applied to humans implicitly extol the doing of something for the sheer pleasure of the exercise that is the activity and, as such, represents anything but a Deweyian understanding of the active human personality.

guises is the overwhelming product of our efforts. Thinking is not done by applying formulas. Thinking takes risks, personal, social, intellectual risks that we of a privileged elite are overwhelmingly chary of taking. The color gray is our color; the English horn our proper sound.

And yet recognition of the overall success of the project that is the university allows me a bit of hope that, though recognizably human with all the weakness that such a species being implies, academics still can try a bit harder to shake off the disciplinary blinders that were once assumed as part of our fight for social preferment. To escape completely the categories that the disciplines provide for us is probably too much to ask. But to care less for those boundaries, to loosen them, to be open to, to be tolerant of, maybe even to welcome alternative categories when offered, and more generally to stop bullying back in line those, even, or maybe especially, the untenured, who chose to breach or possibly ignore those boundaries, ought not to be too much to ask from an educated elite. After all, almost nothing that might be offered as an alternative to current disciplinary categories is likely to corrupt the youth more than a dose of MTV or VH1 or BET or Spike or worse, all together. And it would be difficult to notice any possible increase in the rate of depletion of trees and hydrocarbons from the appearance of more pointless scholarship. It seems that such a loosening, such an opening, might bring the university a mite closer to what is now the only plausible rendering of its original, laudable goal—systematically following our curiosity about our world. Doing so might get us closer to encompassing the universe of potential knowledge. That would be good.

