

Reclaiming the Intellectual Life for Posterity

By Alain de Botton

If you went to any university in the country and said that you had come to study “how to live,” you would be politely shown the door—if not the way to an asylum. Universities see it as their job to train you either in a specific career (law, medicine) or to give you a grounding in “the humanities”—but for no identifiable reason, beyond the vague and unexamined notion that a few years studying the classics or reading *Middlemarch* may be a good idea.

The contemporary university is an uncomfortable amalgamation of ambitions once held by a variety of educational institutions. It owes debts to the philosophical schools of Ancient Greece and Rome, to the monasteries of the Middle Ages, to the theological colleges of Paris, Padua, and Bologna and to the research laboratories of early modern science. One of the legacies of this heterogeneous background is that academics in the humanities have been forced to disguise both from themselves and their students why their subjects really matter—for the sake of attracting money and prestige in a world obsessed by the achievements of science and unable to find a sensible way of assessing the value of a novel or a history book.

The chief problem for anyone in a history or English department today is that science has been too successful. Science can make your car work, fix your liver, send spaceships to Mars, and turn sunlight into electricity. In other words, science is to be valued because it gives us control over our fate, whereas in W. H. Auden’s defiant words “poetry makes nothing happen.” Auden’s stance may be a heroic rallying cry for the freelance poet, but it becomes more alarming as a job description for a young academic who has just completed a doctorate on Biblical references in Percy Bysshe Shelley’s later verse.

The response of humanities departments to their status anxiety has been to mimic their colleagues in physics or astronomy—in a move that has had short-term gains, but is in danger of asphyxiating certain subjects in the long run. Academics in the arts have decided that they, too, should be viewed as “researchers” and that their principal value should come from their capacity to discover new things, like chemists might uncover new molecular structures. There are clearly occasions when scholars do make genuine discoveries which can be compared to breakthroughs in science, but it surely represents a distortion of the value of the arts as a whole to make their value entirely dependent on factual, verifiable criteria.

To do so is to behave like a man who has fallen deeply in love and asks his companion if he might act on his emotions by measuring the distance between her elbow and her shoulder blade. In the modern academy, an art historian, on being stirred to tears by the tenderness and serenity he detects in a work by a fourteenth-century Florentine painter, typically ends up answering his emotions by writing a monograph, as irreproachable as it is bloodless, on the history of paint manufacture in the age of Giotto.

It was in the sixteenth century that the greatest antiacademic scholar of the West launched his attack on the bias of universities. Michel de Montaigne, who had an encyclopedic knowledge of all the great texts, nevertheless deplored the way in which academics tended to privilege learning over wisdom. “I gladly come back to the theme of the absurdity of our education: its end has not been to make us good and wise, but learned. And, to a large extent, it has succeeded.

“It has not taught us to seek virtue and to embrace wisdom: it has impressed upon us their derivation and their etymology. We readily inquire, ‘Does he know Greek or Latin?’ ‘Can he write poetry and prose?’ But

what matters most is what we put last: ‘Has he become better and wiser?’”

So in idle moments, I dream of an ideal new sort of institution which could welcome Montaigne, or indeed Nietzsche, Goethe, or Kierkegaard— a University of Life that would give students the tools to master their lives through the study of culture rather than using culture just for the sake of passing an exam.

This ideal University of Life (which would be equipped with an elegant logo, cafeteria, and headquarters) would draw on traditional areas of knowledge (history, art, literature) but would angle its material toward active concerns (how to choose a career, conduct a relationship, sack someone, and get ready to die).

The university would never take the importance of culture for granted. It would know that culture is kept alive by a constant respectful questioning—not by an excessive and snobbish attitude of respect. Therefore, rather than leaving it hanging why one was reading *Anna Karenina* or *Madame Bovary*, an ideal course covering nineteenth-century literature would ask plainly “What is it that adultery ruins in a marriage?” Students in the ideal University of Life would end up knowing much the same material as their colleagues in other institutions, they would simply have learned it under a very different set of headings.

On the menu of the ideal university, you wouldn’t find subjects like “philosophy,” “French,” “history,” and “the classics.” You would find yourself able to sign up for courses in “death,” “marriage,” “choosing a career,” “ambition,” “child rearing,” or “changing your world.” Too often, these head-on assaults on the great questions are abandoned to the second-rate efforts of gurus and motivational speakers. It is time for high culture to reappropriate them and to consider them with all the rigor and seriousness currently too often lavished on topics of minor relevance.

Plato’s Academy, set up in a bucolic corner of Athens in 387 BC, remains the best model for people dreaming of Universities of Life. The Greek philosopher’s intention was, broadly speaking, political. He believed in civilization and the power of rational thought, and felt that these were being undermined by the degenerate forces of his age, not least by the politicians who dominated Athenian affairs. The philosopher envisaged his university as a chance to change the climate of opinion and to perform in the outside world some of the same intellectually hygienic maneuvers as he practiced in many of his books.

Plato’s belief that wise books may not be enough feels correct, to this writer at least. However convinced one might be at an intellectual level of one’s commitments to an examined life, one risks being only reliably devoted to it when it is routinely affirmed by such public institutions as magazines, television stations, and universities. In danger of being corrupted by the idle chat of our societies, we require places where the aspirations inside us get some confirmation from prestigious bodies around us.

It is common to accept that new desires and needs should continually spawn start-up businesses. So it seems only right that our multiple cultural needs, many of which remain ill-served even in this exceptionally wealthy era, should every now and then also be allowed to spawn original cultural institutions that could better serve our deepest intellectual aspirations. I’ll continue to dream of a world which is sensibly equipped with a University of Life.

Alain de Botton is the author of several books on the “philosophy of everyday life,” including *How Proust Can Change Your Life*. He started and helps run the *School of Life*, a school in London dedicated to a new vision of education (see www.theschooloflife.com). This article was originally published in the July 2008 issue of *Standpoint* magazine. Reprinted by permission.