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The Cost and Value of Your Education

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Cover Page Footnote

This paper was presented as the keynote address at the Psi Chi induction ceremony at Gardner-Webb University in April, 2017. Email: phildreth@gardner-webb.edu.

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Abstract

This brief address explores the issue of the dominance of the economical way of valuing education over a more traditional idea of education as moral formation. An education in a Christian liberal arts university uniquely gives priority to the idea that education should shape the student's moral understanding and consequent actions. The address is an invitation to consider how one, professionally and personally, might serve members of a culture shaped largely by the idea that human meaning and purpose are reducible to economic value as merely producers and consumers.

Keywords: education, liberal arts, humanities, moral formation, Great Recession, Christian education

The Cost and Value of Your Education

For Lent this year, I gave up watching and reading the news. I know I am probably not supposed to tell you that since it might serve as a source of spiritual pride. One of my colleagues in the Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy upbraided me as being, perhaps, scholarly and civically irresponsible. I guess time will be the judge on that count, although I think there is probably very little of significance that I will miss in these 40 or so days. So, when I say that I want to talk to you about a particular serious concern that we face in our society today, I want you to hear that I am not addressing any contemporary political concern directly. My concern about our society is not directed at any political party or leader. In fact, my concern is more broadly with the greater portion of political and civic life in American society.

My concern is, very simply, the degree to which economic value has become the default and final measure for evaluation for all aspects of human life and activity for a significant portion of contemporary people. I am not alone in this concern. For Lent, I am reading a little book titled *Dethroning Mammon: Making Money Serve Grace* written by Justin Welby, the current Archbishop of Canterbury. In this short reflection, Welby called for a serious reflection on the degree to which the economy has warped our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. Likewise, Harvard theologian Harvey Cox addressed this concern in his recent book titled *The Market as God*. In his book, he explored the notion that the financial market has been deified by much of contemporary society as an absolute omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent force in our lives. So, when we ask what action is prudent, the answer is “what the Market” demands. Pope Francis also identified this concern:

We calmly accept (money’s) dominion over ourselves and our societies. The current financial crisis can make us overlook the fact that it originated in a profound human

crisis: the denial of the primacy of the human person! We have created new idols. The worship of the ancient golden calf (cf. Ex 32:1-35) has returned in a new and ruthless guise in the idolatry of money and the dictatorship of an impersonal economy lacking a truly human purpose. The worldwide crisis affecting finance and the economy lays bare their imbalances and, above all, their lack of real concern for human beings; man is reduced to one of his needs alone: consumption. (p. 47)

On a more philosophical note, British philosopher of religion Philip Goodchild (2009) developed a “Theology of Money” which posited the Western economic system as a type of religion that includes its own unique set of beliefs and practices. In such a world, human beings are, then, producers and consumers.

The lure of wealth is not a new problem for human individuals and communities. Our ancestors warned us about it. Plato, Aristotle, and Jesus, among others, warned that a life lived for wealth alone is a lesser kind of existence. In the gospels, Jesus probably addressed wealth more than any other subject, and he warned of the power it can potentially hold over a human being. As Eugene Peterson paraphrased Jesus’ wisdom, “You can’t worship two gods at once. Loving one god, you’ll end up hating the other. Adoration of one feeds contempt for the other. You can’t worship God and Money both” (Mt. 6:24 The Message). So, we know that this problem is not a new one. The unique problem for us is the almost total failure of contemporary people to know, to remember, and to heed the warning of these wise ancestors.

I do not know any better example of the pervasiveness of this problem than that of our contemporary attitude regarding education. It is a given these days—an almost unquestioned axiom of American culture—that the sole and exclusive purpose of education is to prepare our young for the world of work. And so, before their brains and mental faculties are fully formed,

our education system requires that students, younger and younger, chart their path toward a career. Never mind that we acknowledge their lack of judgment by denying them the privilege of operating a motor vehicle, marrying, or voting for governmental officials; we develop clever ways of “getting them through school” quickly and less expensively so they can assume their proper place, as soon as possible, living as producers and consumers. Time, after all, is money. Money, after all, is the most important thing since it enables individuals to pursue most freely whatever end they determine for their lives. And so, education is conceptualized only as a means toward that end.

I am not disparaging meaningful work as a part of meaningful living. I am also not suggesting that money or wealth is in and of itself evil. I might even agree with Aristotle and Maslow that a certain level of economic security and material well-being is needed for most of us to achieve our potential as human beings. I am not suggesting that education should not contribute to a person’s preparation for the world of work. What I am suggesting, though, is that there is something destructive in conceptualizing education as merely a means toward the end of economic productivity.

In this regard, Wendell Berry, the Kentucky farmer, poet, and cultural critic provided some wisdom. Berry wrote,

The complexity of our present trouble suggests as never before that we need to change our present concept of education. Education is not properly an industry, and its proper use is not to serve industries, neither by job-training nor by industry-subsidized research. *Its proper use is to enable citizens to live lives that are economically, politically, socially, and culturally responsible.* This cannot be done by gathering or "accessing" "information," which is to say, facts without context and therefore without priority. A

proper education enables young people to put their lives in order, which means knowing what things are more important than other things; it means putting first things first. (p. 21)

To suggest that the purpose of education is to provide a context in which one learns good judgement, or to teach moral and civic responsibility, or to pass the wisdom of our ancestors on to future generations, or to provide a space for the consideration of human meaning and value—these very old answers to this question—sounds very strange against the assumptions of our day.

How very odd then is Plato's view that the purpose of education is to learn to love that which is beautiful—even if we explain that by beauty Plato is addressing both aesthetic and moral values (Republic, III, 403c). What about the return on the investment? Education is expensive after all. If I do not learn a marketable skill, how will I ever pay back my student loans? Why should I seek an education if I can make at least as much money without one? Why should we as a society spend great sums of public money on educating the young who only need to learn a basic skill for work? Those are reasonable and prudent questions, but they are rooted ultimately in the worldview which I have addressed this afternoon—a worldview that says that all meaningful human activity has economic value and that the value of any human activity is measured solely by its monetary worth. What if, as just about all our wise ancestors have warned us, wealth is in fact a deceptively shallow source of meaning. What if the most important values are not economic in nature?

By now you may be wondering why I chose to share these things with you this afternoon. You are students of psychology. Perhaps, you think, I have gotten confused and have come to this gathering by mistake—seeing that the education honor society is having their induction this afternoon, too. I have talked about education and economics, and I have not directly addressed

minds and human behavior or the all-important relationship between philosophy and psychology. Or haven't I? While it is true that the study of psychology has its roots in philosophy, it is also the case that philosophy has never truly given up on that most psychological concern: the care of the soul. What does it mean to be a human being? What is happiness? Does life have a purpose? Does *my* life have a purpose? How do I live a meaningful and purposeful life? The kind of worldview I have described this afternoon suppresses reflection about such questions, but they are fundamental human questions. Many adults who have appropriated uncritically the answer that they are primarily producers and consumers will most likely face life crises in which they will discover the limits of these definitions. I wonder how many psychological turning points are rooted in the questions: Who am I and Why Am I Here? I have a strong sense that those of you who will become counselors or therapists truly need to be cognizant of the context in which such questions arise. I make no claim about my ability to predict the future, but I will say that if or when our society experiences another major financial meltdown, philosophers, psychologists, ministers, poets, and artists alike will be needed to help people once again make sense of the world and their lives. And it might be the case that those of you who hope to work on the research side of the field can consider ways in which you might be able to experimentally demonstrate the weakness of such a feeble view of human purpose as the basis of a life of human flourishing. Does the data show what our elders have told us to be true? I would be willing to risk that it does! Greed is both sinful and psychologically unhealthy.

Second, as fellow citizens, we share a common responsibility for the well-being of our society. You have demonstrated by your diligence with your studies some measure of your potential as a leader beyond your graduation. As professionals in your field, as parents, teachers, and ministers, you will have the opportunity to shape in large and small ways some aspects of

our society. Each of you has hopefully benefited here at Gardner-Webb from an education that has stressed that human purpose cannot be reduced to earning potential. How different is the life of one who has different priorities, who prays with the psalmist: “One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple” (Ps 27:4 NRSV).

Our University’s motto, *Pro Deo et Humanitate*, as a summary of the Greatest Commandment of Jesus, reflects the Christian ideal and sensibility that human purposes are larger than economic success. Because none of us knows what the future might hold, the faculty has aimed to invest in you the wisdom of our ancestors that we pray will serve you well as you confront the challenges of your own day. In the midst of an age of great change, hopefully, we have pointed you toward that which is Eternal and Unchanging—that which alone is worthy of your absolute allegiance and commitment. I challenge you today to pay forward the investment we have made in you. Before long, you will be the elders, and it will be up to you to pass on the wisdom that you have borrowed from the past.

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