

Is it wrong to teach what is right and wrong? The debate at K.U.Leuven

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Should we encourage students to take up their social responsibilities? And if so, how should we go about it? I have been asked to expound on how K.U.Leuven has dealt with this debate. For a thorough overview I will need to follow at least two lines of thought: there's the specific story of the concrete evolution at K.U.Leuven, and the more general story of the changes in mentality forming the background of the specific debate within Belgian universities in general. In my opinion, these changes in mentality, which are often associated with the collapse of the modern meta-narratives - 'la fin des grands métarécits modernes', to quote the French philosopher François Lyotard¹ - deserve particular attention.

I would first like to talk about the specific history. Our university is called Catholic, even though that epithet has frequently been challenged in the last forty years. Even before the split of 1968, some argued for a secularisation of the university: to dispense with the K of K.U.Leuven, the disciplines associated with religion and morality should be transferred to a separate institution. These proposals have never been accepted, however.² Mgr Albert Dondeyne and the future Rector Pieter De Somer had always defended the Catholicity of K.U.Leuven on the grounds that a Catholic university does not have to be considered a confessional, apologetic stronghold, but can be a high-minded university, participating in national and international university life.³ In practice, most professors and students were Catholics. The disciplinary regulations, printed in the lecture schedules until 1960, were strict: "Every student and every university official has to profess the Catholic Religion and observe its duties."⁴ An in-depth sociological study proves that up until 1974, more than 80% of the academic staff of K.U.Leuven were practicing Catholics.⁵ This percentage gradually declined. Regarding students, in 1990 about 30% were practicing Catholics.⁶ That number has probably declined since then as well.

¹ Jean François, *La Condition postmoderne: Rapport sur le savoir*. Paris: Minuit, 1979.

² J. Declercq, 'De Katholieke Universiteit' in *De Maand* 7(1964)5, 287.

³ A. Dondeyne, 'Katholieke universiteit: zin of onzin?' in *Onze Alma Mater*, 19(1965)2, 22; P. De Somer, 'De Leuvense Universiteit: haar taken in deze tijd' in *De Maand*, 5(1962)9, 522.

⁴ *Programme des cours / Programma der leergangen 1960-1961*, Louvain / Leuven, Université Catholique de Louvain / Katholieke Universiteit te Leuven, 1960, p. 13. (Art. 19) The students are urged "to frequently approach the Holy Sacraments." (Art. 20) In any case it was "strictly forbidden to enter a house that could not boast an irreproachable repute." (Art. 25) The disciplinary commission could admonish, suspend, or expel students for short or long duration. The disciplinary commission continued to exist after the split, but intervened rarely. Mgr Maertens describes the commission as an occasion for enjoying wine and cheese with fellow commission members, while the chair of the commission gravely presented many an entirely fictitious case. This story illustrates the irony that accompanied the observation of traditions. The tradition was felt to be a matter of course, but did not preclude the opportunity for unrestricted reflection.

⁵ R. Creyf, K. Dobbelaere, J. Vanhoutvinck, *Professoren en het 'katholieke karakter van hun Universiteit'. Een sociologisch onderzoek naar definiëeringsprocessen terzake aan de K.U.Leuven*. Leuven, Sociologisch Onderzoeksinstituut, 1977.

⁶ D. Verhoeven, *De levensbeschouwing van studenten aan de K.U.Leuven. Een sociaal-wetenschappelijke studie*. Leuven, Sociologisch onderzoeksinstituut, 1994.

Not only has the numerical balance shifted, but also the interpretation of what it actually means to be Catholic has changed. Theologians like Schillebeeckx were so interesting in the seventies and eighties because they parenthesised the church worship of Christ and focused on the concrete humanity of Jesus. This change in perspective was influenced by the highly valued shift in emphasis from ecclesiastical institution to concrete interpersonal involvement. In the hopeful wake of the Council text *Gaudium et Spes*, the Catholic tradition seemed to transform into an open and modern worldview. In the late sixties, for instance, many modern theologians took for granted that priest celibacy would be abolished and that the Church would gradually transform into a modern, democratic organisation with an open and engaged vision. Commitment to the Church seemed perfectly reconcilable with world citizenship. Council texts like *Humanae Vitae* spoiled this perspective. From the eighties on, the institutional Church seemed to withdraw into itself. Explicitly identifying with Catholicism became less 'normal'.

The university authorities made clear that the confessional character of our university should never stand in the way of the freedom of research. The speech to the visiting Pope John Paul II by Pieter De Somer, the rector at the time, is legendary:



“The Catholic University of Leuven has a duty constantly to question inherited truths and to adapt if necessary to modern language and thought. That inevitably brings with it conflicts between error and orthodoxy. A Catholic intellectual, indeed any intellectual, stands at the frontier between the known and the unknown. Whatever their discipline, seekers must have the freedom to chart that unknown, to elaborate working hypotheses and to put them to the test, to integrate new findings with the already known, or to draw new conclusions about what went before. They must also have the right to be mistaken, that is one of the

essential conditions for them to exercise their function as seekers, and for the university to carry out its proper institutional function.”⁷

This open and engaged view was inspired by Mgr Albert Dondeyne.⁸ He was the driving force behind the *Universitas* movement, as it is called in Leuven. It is striking how many professors who would later run the university administration were inspired by their participation in the *Universitas* movement.

Let's turn to the educational aspect. All K.U.Leuven students followed introductory courses in philosophy, metaphysics, and ethics. Why metaphysics? Within the classical Catholic

⁷ Translation from French quoted from John Sayer, 'Linking Universities across Europe. Principles, Practicalities and Perspectives' in David Smith, Anne Karin Langslow (eds.) *The Idea of a University*, (Higher Education Policy, 51). London, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1999, p. 68-90, p. 80.

⁸ Bert Claerhout, 'Voormalig KU Leuven-rector Roger Dillemans over Albert Dondeyne: 'Een aristocraat van de geest' in *Tertio*, 25 mei 2005 - p. 13-14.

worldview, metaphysics is the backbone of all knowledge. The way in which God has created the world means that everything that exists abides by specific regularities because it is on its way to the fulfilment of its essential finality. The founder of the *Hoger Instituut voor Wijsbegeerte*, the future cardinal Mercier, saw no contradiction whatsoever between science and metaphysics. Science and metaphysics lined up perfectly. So did science and ethics. Deep down in their hearts, people know what is right and wrong, because they can discover God's natural law in their essence. This view was not only expounded in Catholic universities. Ghent, for instance, had lectures by Edgard De Bruyne, who became famous again through Umberto Eco. He reconciled the academic investigation of ethics of his time with Thomism.⁹

Metaphysics (later renamed fundamental philosophy) and ethics remained compulsory courses for any discipline up until the Bachelor-Master reforms. These days, the government encourages educational directors to provide courses in philosophy as well as ethics and religion in their programmes. For strategic reasons, the latter course was renamed *Religie, zingeving en levensbeschouwing*. Apparently, many programme directors fail to distinguish between these courses and seem to think that one course in world view and morality should be enough.

During the eighties and nineties, secularisation gradually increased. More people began to worry about the loss of explicit moral training. In 1992, K.U.Leuven formed a committee to investigate 'the university and the formation of values'.¹⁰ This committee was asked to investigate how to prevent the growing economisation of the university stemming from the university's seemingly one-sided focus on economic performance and the accompanying and omnipresent ethical relativism. The committee saw a need for reflection and applied ethics, and for resistance against the rationalisation of a university based on purely quantitative criteria. The mission statement of the university could be used as a guiding principle. The committee also suggested increased investment in value formation, without defending a one-sided value system. It insisted on more broadly formative courses, the foundation of an ethical commission, a stronger focus on deontological courses, the foundation of an interfaculty programme in applied ethics, and support for the Centre for Ethics. It suggested more emphasis on the profile of the lecturer as an inspiring example, and the need to stress independent learning and critical debate. On top of this, the commission held that alternative forms of student accommodation should be promoted. This is why the Dondeyne house was founded, a house where students live together and organise lectures and debates, after the example of the house where the *Universitas* vision developed.

As in many other universities, the interest in ethics expressed itself in the foundation of several centres for applied ethics in the eighties and nineties. This happened whenever a series of scientific, technical, or social developments within a certain professional sphere led to delicate ethical questions needing the expertise of 'ethicists'. The Centre for Biomedical Ethics arose when medical technology caused an increase in embarrassing options. The Centre for Economics and Ethics started looking into social issues when the social security system was challenged. Business ethicists applied themselves to professional deontological codes when the

⁹ Edgard De Bruyne, *Ethica*, Vol 1: *De structuur van het zedelijk probleem*, Standaard Boekhandel, Antwerpen / Brussel, 1934; Vol 2: *De ontwikkeling van het zedelijk bewustzijn*, Standaard Boekhandel, Antwerpen / Brussel, 1935, Vol 3 *De diepere zin van de zedelijkheid*, Standaard Boekhandel, Antwerpen / Brussel, 1936. Jean-Pierre Rondas, 'Steeled in the School of Old Aquinas: Umberto Eco on the Shoulders of Edgar de Bruyne' in Koenraad Du Pont e.a. (Eds.) *Eco in Fabula*, Universitaire Pers Leuven, Leuven, 2002.

¹⁰ L. Bouckaert, A. Ceulemans, M. Debrock, H. De Dijn, M. Hellemans, P. Janssen, P. Schotsmans, J. Vandewalle, J. Vermeylen, J. Verstraeten, P. Mareels, F. Poulet, A. Grieken, *Eindrapport 'universiteit en waardenvorming'* s.l, s.d. 7 p.

workers' and management's ethos became alienated from traditional moral views. The environmental crisis, developments in biotechnology, and the increased importance of animal welfare sped up agricultural and environmental ethics. Similarly, media ethics grew in importance because developments in this sector sometimes raised eyebrows.

In spite of the apparently 'promising' interest in ethics, applied ethicists have never succeeded in raising the social debate on moral issues to a higher level. Within their own faculties, these ethicists were seen as experts, lightning rods able to conduct the hot questions skilfully. It went without saying that ethical debates were left to experts. The arguments the practicing ethicist uses to justify or condemn a certain practice are therefore seldom subjected to scrutiny. In that sense, the growth of applied ethics has not led to an increase in critical reflection on moral issues.

Up till now, K.U.Leuven's concern about the centrality of values has not disappeared. Last year, a strategic five-year plan was drawn up to specify the framework of prioritised policy options. This plan is built on four principles: the development of values, openness and versatility, quality, and concentration as the combination of strengths. Values development is thus one of the four principles of the 'Integrated strategic plan for K.U.Leuven 2007-2012,' which insists that a university education should be more than the transfer of capacities that can be capitalised in the economic sphere. The only thing missing is the articulation of possible concrete applications of these principles, possibly because our modern mentality hampers the concrete application of this commitment. It is therefore high time we looked at this mentality more thoroughly.

More important than the particular history (*les petites histoires*) is the general change in mentality that has taken place, not only at K.U.Leuven, but at just about all other universities. The engaged vision of the sixties that despised business life, has been exchanged for a lifestyle that celebrates assertiveness, career planning and entrepreneurship. The world appears to have grown tougher and more merciless. Students seem to think of themselves as clients of a system that only exists to improve their competence profile, while lecturers assume that their responsibility is limited to the transfer of those competences. Today, ethics is considered a field-specific discipline mainly focussing on the implementation of specific professional deontologies. The sell-by date of morality in its classical sense appears to have passed. Ever since Tintin lost his innocence in Africa, it has been considered wiser to let the students decide how to organise their own lives. All ideological views, whether they are liberal, social democratic, or Christian in inspiration, seem to have run dry.

Well, I propose that this perception is mistaken. I am convinced that the current reserve with regard to moral education does not stem from a weakened ideological commitment, but from one that is too strong. The current embarrassment with regard to ideological opinions or moral education is not the result of indecisiveness or indifference. It is based on an alternative ideological commitment. Our current social relations are characterised by an overstrained commitment to more human equality. This commitment is laudable, but the radicalness of its implementation means that a number of cultural and moral distinctions are no longer self-evident.

The contemporary pursuit of total equality contributes to our tendency to carefully check for any possible offensive or derogatory interpretation before we say or write something. If we find one, we swallow our words or formulate our proposition in a friendlier tone of voice. After all,

we feel attached to an understanding in which every individual's worldview and habits are considered to be of no less value than those of anyone else. Our concern not to offend anyone feeds our reflex to systematically dismiss the public appreciation of a particular moral or cultural ideal as superseded, nostalgic, elitist, or paternalistic. That is because we long for a society in which no one has to feel wrong, a failure, or superficial; a society that is not marked by ideologies able to establish hierarchical differences for justification. It is in keeping with this collective desire to question the distinctions between civilised and uncivilised, profound and superficial, and morally justified and morally unjustified. Distinctions like these appear to lead to a difference in evaluation. Every distinction between 'culturally correct' and 'culturally wrong' people seems to threaten equality, which is why many academics in the humanities feel the need to skilfully deconstruct similar distinctions. They think that people should be able to cultivate the impression that the value of their moral lifestyle is entirely private. It is simply not done to give one's opinion on the moral qualities of someone else's preferences. After all, everyone should be able to cultivate the illusion that the life he or she leads is as justified as the life of anyone else. That is the reason why we are embarrassed when someone with a distinct moral view or cultural ideal disturbs the noncommittal nature of our modern understanding.

The resistance to any discourse that implies that some lifestyles are of higher moral standing than others does not stem from a lack of seriousness, but is based on the conviction that the idealisation of a lifestyle will result in a diktat or lead to patronising disdain. Instead of a positive interpretation of the possible goal of freedom, we choose a negative concept of freedom, which implies that we let individuals choose what they value culturally or morally. By refusing to examine the importance of moral and cultural virtues more deeply, we create an atmosphere that makes it seem inconsequential how someone chooses to organise his or her life. This mentality has not only made teaching morality uncongenial. For many fields in the humanities, this noncommittal mentality has actually proven fatal. How can you defend the value of ancient languages, history, aesthetics, philosophy, literature, religion, dance, or theatre, when one has to admit that they have no surplus economic value when you give the impression that it's entirely inconsequential how someone chooses to organise his or her life? How can you say that education humanises at the same time that you deny some lifestyles are more humane than others? Without fully realising it, our dedication to more equality has undermined the legitimacy of morality and culture. Now that the concept of civilisation has been skilfully deconstructed within the humanities, no one should be surprised at the confusion on the possible usefulness of culture and morality.

The current moral understanding has led to a change in linguistic usage. Concepts that were laden with guilt- and shame-inducing connotations like desire, greed, gluttony, aggression, or selfishness were skilfully neutralised. All urges and desires, no matter how low or high-minded, are now called 'preferences' or 'needs'. As long as they are not illegal, they are deemed equal. Within the current understanding, this neutralisation is experienced as liberation, which is probably why economic language has started to dominate many sectors. This neutralising usage developed within the universities themselves. In political sciences as well as law, psychology, and philosophy, the fundamental importance of various liberties is defended, but no goals are expressed that make it worth pursuing this freedom. People should choose these goals on their own.

My second proposition implies that the commitment to negative freedom has reached a point where this freedom does more harm than good. Because universities systematically refuse to go

into the importance of a high-quality moral and cultural understanding, they strengthen the impression that it is inconsequential how people choose to organise their lives. Discrediting value judgements has an especially unfavourable effect on the weakest socio-economic subcultures in our society, where the temptation of instant gratification is great. People in these subcultures will more easily reach for unhealthy food, trendy audiovisual entertainment, or sensational media. They will more quickly proceed to risky loans or reckless spending. The 'culture' in these groups does not prompt people to curb impulsive behaviour, to weigh things up, to analyse, or plan things. This kind of 'culture' does not cherish long term projects. The immediate result is weaker school performances, which limits the future options of youngsters from these subcultures. Because of the impression that responsibility and culture don't matter, there is no ideal available within these subcultures and therefore no way out of the social inequality stimulated by that subculture either. Because the academic interest in culture and morality has consciously been super-cooled through the politically correct commitment to negative freedom, university graduates withdraw into their own sphere of life and no longer feel responsible for the culture of their community. The resulting misery is hard to overestimate. That is why students should be taught once more what makes a life interesting as regards content and why morality and culture matter.

But the question is: how? How does one convince students of the value of moral and cultural virtues these days? It is clearly neither likely nor even desirable that this should happen through a renewed scheduling of moral lessons. Not that I believe that moral lessons make people uncritical. The opposite seems more likely. But they do not give much return. Organising moral lessons would require major amounts of energy for a minor result. But there are other and more attractive ways to show students that moral and cultural virtues matter, for instance by testifying to that fact when preparing a class or when meticulously conducting an investigation. By going about one's job honestly and carefully, one automatically shows that one attaches great importance to taking a series of principles seriously.

Less obvious is setting up debates on the way society ideally should be organised. Every course topic introduces skills that are useful to society one way or another. Doctors study health, jurists study law, economists study the efficient organization of trade and industry, psychologist study how our intelligence, social involvement and relationships with other people function, linguists and communication scientists study communication and literature. All these sciences deal with an aspect of society. That is why in every discipline ideas will grow concerning how certain skills or reorganizations can contribute to the welfare of society. These views are hardly compared. Researchers and lecturers from different disciplines hardly know anything about the social debates that go on in other fields. One could also look at this problem from the perspective of the community. Research results untranslatable to economics are of no use to society. That is because the results are too fragmented and the conclusions are mutually incompatible. There is no broad framework that can direct the various research results and connect them. This makes the contribution of universities with regard to social problems seem irrelevant. There is a lot of potential to be found in interdisciplinary debates on society. Initiatives of this kind already exist. Think of the *Midis de l'éthique* in Louvain-La-Neuve, the *Lectures for the Twenty-first Century* in Leuven, and the *Science Cafes* at the VUB in Brussels, but the impact of initiatives like this is still too small. Still, the ideal is, as Aristotle suggested, for a reflection on ethics to be preceded by a reflection on the kind of society we want to live in. Debates on concrete issues like energy consumption, the organization of social security, the unity of our Belgian institutions, or the tax burden will automatically help us to clarify what

moral principles could guide us. In any case, we should avoid the view that ethics is a field-specific discipline in which only experts are good judges.

For the moral formation of youth, I have another concrete proposal. In our meritocratic society with its unequal division of opportunities for social advancement through education, university graduates should realise that their expensive schooling entails a social responsibility. They should realise that they're not just the winners of a competitive race, but privileged citizens who are expected not to use their skills only for themselves but also for the good of society and their fellow citizens, economically as well as culturally. However, passing on this sense of responsibility through lectures does not appear simple. That is why I argue that every student should do a compulsory internship in a sector where he or she can become acquainted with the perspectives of less privileged people. These acts of service should not be seen as a young, dynamic relief worker coming to the aid of a victim, but the other way round, as a 'victim' offering aid to the relief worker by showing him or her what the world looks like on the other end of the demographic pyramid. This kind of work placement should be carefully supervised and organised, with the greatest respect possible. In general, studies of the effects of similar placements in other countries are promising. It turns out that youth who are confronted with a perspective from the bottom up become more aware of the responsibility they bear and show more respect for democratic and social institutions.

Furthermore, it remains important that university students read the classics, whether Plato, Augustine, Shakespeare or Dostoevsky. At a university, culture and morality should be intertwined. Therefore I think that a renewed debate on how sports, literature, history, aesthetics and philosophy humanise a lifestyle, and the related debate on what civilisation signifies, would be interesting.