***Potens Omnia*: Enduring Longings in a Secularized Culture**

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Draft, not for citation

In 1935, a young Thomas Merton, the French born émigré to America who would go on to convert to Catholicism, enter a Trappist monastery and pen the best-selling autobiography *Seven Storey Mountain*, entered Columbia University as a student. He soon found himself in an English Literature course taught by Mark Van Doren, whose pedagogy had a lasting impact on Merton. “Who is this who really loves what he has to teach, and does not secretly detest all literature, and abhor poetry, while pretending to be a professor of it?”[[1]](#footnote-1) Merton was drawn to the course because it addressed the most important questions and spoke to the deepest longings of the human soul and it did so in a way that crossed standard disciplinary divisions into literature, philosophy, and theology: “It was the only place where I ever heard anything really sensible about any of the things that were really fundamental—life, death, time, love, sorrow, fear, wisdom, suffering, eternity.”[[2]](#footnote-2) It was also at Columbia that Merton would encounter a group of students with a passion for books, a love of conversation, and a commitment to probing the most important questions about their lives.

Merton’s own quest would move beyond the reaches of his Columbia education, to the Catholic contemplative life, as articulated in theology by Thomas Aquinas and practiced in the Trappist monastic community. Yet, in what he did find at Columbia, we can discern certain key elements of a truly liberal education. First, it responds to the most important questions of human life, questions posed at least implicitly by all human beings at one time or another. Second, it understands itself as responding to a felt need, a lack, a longing in the soul. Third, it embodies and cultivates a community of inquirers in which students converse with one another and with faculty, both inside and outside the classroom, where there is some intimate connection between a set of books, a community and a way of life.

In his retelling of his time at Columbia, Merton focuses mainly on the influence of a master teacher. But Van Doren was not laboring in isolation or against the grain of an institution indifferent to liberal education. On the contrary, Columbia was at that time in the vanguard of a relatively new movement in undergraduate education that focused on the common reading of classic texts across a variety of disciplines. Although Merton himself found distasteful some of the core courses he was required to take, he profited from the intellectual milieu—the integrated, interdisciplinary reading of primary texts—that constituted the general education curriculum at Columbia. The inspiration for that curriculum, which has been dubbed “the most famous course ever in the history of American curriculum,” was not antiquarianism but a felt need to help students address contemporary problems, particularly in the wake of the First World War. [[3]](#footnote-3) The goal of Columbia’s curriculum, which began in 1919 and flourished under the leadership of John Erskine, was not to so much to guide students into careers as to “help them see life broadly.” [[4]](#footnote-4) Erskine traced the genesis of the curriculum to a widespread concern within the faculty about "the literary ignorance of the younger generation." Harry Carman puts the point even more directly. "In introducing the general survey course," he said, "Columbia has operated on the assumption that it is not the fundamental business of the College to turn out specialists in a narrow field, and that an individual is, after all, not well educated unless he or she has at least some conception of the broad field of intellectual endeavor."[[5]](#footnote-5) Now although Merton’s pursuit of wisdom led him to theology and a monastic vocation, there is nothing at all theological about the Columbia vision. Instead, the focus is on humanistic literacy and breadth of education. But the curricular focus is not necessarily anti-theological either. It included theological texts and in the reading of Shakespeare raised questions that take us to the cusp of the religious. It was, as we’ve already heard Merton say, about matters that “were really fundamental.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

What Merton found at Columbia was a protreptic, that is, an introductory turning of the soul to the most important things and an initiation in the activities constitutive of the life of intellectual virtue. This is more than academic training, or the mastery of rudimentary skills. What students need today is what they have always needed. They need to see themselves as heirs of a great tradition of learning that they could delightfully spend the rest of their lives trying to master. Now, Merton was, as we all are to one extent or another, selective in his appropriation of traditions to which he was heir. He had little patience for pagan philosophy. He would come to see serious limitations in what Columbia could offer by way of liberation of the soul, but this was more a general complaint about the limits of what any university could do for the re-formation of souls deformed by vice. He would also come to see serious limitations to his early and exclusive focus on Western authors. Nonetheless, Columbia succeeded in offering a liberal education prompted by the “insistent problems of the present”; it sought to provide students with an “inner life of sufficient richness” through an encounter with books and “ideas that have persisted.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

In what follows, I want to reflect on the connection between the insistent problems of the present and persistent longings in the souls of students that undergird liberal education. It is striking how much the First and Second World Wars informed the reflection of Columbia University’s administration and of Thomas Merton on liberal education.

The sense of civilization in crisis, of modernity as as much about loss as about gain, have prompted some of the most profound modern writing on liberal education. Many 20th century writers on liberal education hope to stir “dull roots with spring rain” and to nourish both memory and desire in the midst of the waste land of World Wars. The sense of loss or absence along with the desire for recovery or an inclination to pursue the good, however dimly glimpsed, is a motive for liberal education. The movement from what one lacks to its possession is built into the very etymology of liberal education, to be led forth into freedom. It seems to me that this conception of liberal education presupposes some conception of the human soul as capable of being educated, as open to the whole and as irreducible to material, physical satisfactions and as transcending, at least in its telos, any material, political or economic order. As Jacques Maritain puts it, “If the aim of education is the helping and guiding of man toward his own human achievement, education cannot escape the problems and entanglements of philosophy, for it supposes by its very nature a philosophy of man, and from the outset it is obliged to answer the question: ‘What is man?’ which the philosophical sphinx is asking.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

Such a notion of the human person straddles the secular and sacred and could perhaps provide a starting point for dialogue between secular and sacred, for a recovery and rearticulation of enduring longings in a secularized culture.[[9]](#footnote-9) We need to be careful here. There is no unified secular over here set off against a unified secular over there, or as some would have it everywhere. There are of course multiple, conceptions of the secular and sacred, so dialogue would be possible not just between but within accounts of the secular and sacred. Moreover, a growing number of influential philosophers, including Habermas and Taylor, and sociologists, including Berger and Hunter, now question the secularization thesis—some even speak of our age as “post-secular.”

Beyond complications regarding the secular and sacred, there are numerous obstacles to the recovery of classical conception of soul as *potens omnia*. I have no intention in the present essay of responding to these philosophical objections although I think responses can be had. I will, at a later point in the essay consider two contemporary obstacles to the recovery of liberal education, one inherent in the structure of the modern, secular research university, the other increasingly dominant in the souls of religious students.

I. Even the Ruins are Destroyed: Liberal Education Amid the Rubble[[10]](#footnote-10)

Thomas Merton’s *Seven Storey* begins with his birth in 1915, “in a year of great war,” in France, a few hundred miles from the world of war, where “they were picking up the men who rotted in the rainy ditches among the dead horses.” Later, as a young adult, Merton faces the possibility of having to enter the next great war, deliberates about whether the war is just, and decides to file a CO claim, before a physical rendered the point otiose. Later, in the 1960’s he would become allied with the anti-war movement. But *in medias res* in the 1940’s as he was discerning his the next steps in his life’s journey, he saw the war as symptomatic of modern life, its violence and uncertainty, its passion and anger. Ultimately he saw it as a reflection of his own disordered soul: “This war was what I had earned for myself and for the world.”[[11]](#footnote-11) The conflagration of world war was as a reflection of individual and communal disorder. For Merton, it put into question the very foundations of civilization and led him to ponder the nature of liberal education, in the broadest and deepest sense, as a liberation of the soul from various bonds or vices.[[12]](#footnote-12)   
  
Jacques Maritain was similarly provoked by war to compose, in 1943, *Education at the Crossroads*, a book that scatters references to the Nazis and WWII throughout. It is, to borrow a title from C.S. Lewis, a defense of learning in war-time, but with a very different motive from the one that inspired Lewis’s work. The latter’s “Learning in War-Time,” a sermon preached in 1939, is a response to the accusation the pursuit of liberal education in time of war is a frivolous pursuit. Lewis retorts that war is not exceptional; rather, it simply “aggravates the permanent human situation.” He proceeds to argue on behalf of the non-utilitarian goods found in education.[[13]](#footnote-13)

For Maritain, the very nature of the conflict of WWII is cause for fresh reflection on, for a deep reconsideration of, the nature and purpose of liberal society and of liberal education. This is not to say that Maritain instrumentalizes liberal education for the sake of patriotism or citizenship. In fact, he identifies such political instrumentalization of education as one of the chief temptations of his day—most evident in the Nazi system of education where there are no ends that transcend the state. But it is also a danger for the West. Maritain urges resistance to “the temptation of warping and perverting all [education’s] work by making itself a tool of the state to shape youth according to the collective pattern supposedly needed by the pride, greed or myths of the earthly community.”[[14]](#footnote-14) That is a judgment that can apply to totalitarian regimes and liberal democracies. Maritain worried that education would aim, not at making individuals fully human, but at making them organs of technocratic society—whatever the political ideology.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The political problems of the day mirror the problems afflicting liberal education, the disregarding of ends and the fascination with means, the latter of which are “so good, we lose sight of the end.”[[16]](#footnote-16) With its reduction of knowledge to calculable phenomena, technocracy “leaves in human life nothing but relationships of force, or at best those of pleasure.” It ignores or repudiates the “spiritual dignity of man” and rests on “the assumption that merely material or biological standards rule human life and morality.”[[17]](#footnote-17) He quotes Bergson’s claim that “the body, now larger, calls for a bigger soul.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Paradoxically, what healthy social orders most need is education for ends that transcend the merely political order. This thesis is in keeping with Maritain’s so-called personalism, which denies that the human person exists merely “as a physical being.” Instead, the human person has a “richer and nobler existence,…a spiritual” existence “through knowledge and love. The human person is thus in some way a whole, not merely a part,… a microcosm, in which the great universe in its entirely can be encompassed through knowledge.” One way to recast this view is to formulate it in terms of Aristotle’s notion of the soul as *potens omnia*, potentially all things.[[19]](#footnote-19) The strangest of all creatures traversing earth is the animal that is open to the whole.

Alongside the dangers of political totalitarianism, there is the pressure of the world of total work, as the fellow Catholic philosopher Josef Pieper calls it, the temptation to think of oneself as coextensive with one’s work.[[20]](#footnote-20) As a corrective, Maritain offers what he calls an integral education, an integral humanism, on the basis of which we might put an “end to cleavage between religious inspiration and secular activity.” One of the problems facing liberal civilization, a problem faced by both secular and religious citizens, is that of human leisure. Education ordered merely to the making of successful workers engaged in successful careers, forgets that work is not an end in itself, that “work should afford leisure for the joy, expansion, and delight of the spirit.”[[21]](#footnote-21) While in our time university administrators seem intent on justifying liberal education as a means of the acquisition of employable skills, Maritain thought that liberal education was most needful as offering an education for leisure, not for an aristocratic life of leisure but for an education in how to enjoy one’s free or vacant time.

The question of what our free time is for is for Maritain connected with the question of what the aim of human life is—a point we have already seen him make: “If the aim of education is the helping and guiding of man toward his own human achievement, education cannot escape the problems and entanglements of philosophy, for it supposes by its very nature a philosophy of man.” Maritain worries about reductionism of various kinds: in the celebration of means over ends, of techniques of power over virtues, and in materialist assumptions about human nature. This worry arises not just for totalitarianism but also for liberal democracy. Maritain asks, “What are we fighting for if the only thing human reason can do is to measure and manage matter? If we have no means of determining what freedom, justice, spirit, human personality, and human dignity consist of, and why they are worthy of our dying for them, then we are fighting and dying only for words.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

More concretely, Maritain thinks that there is a need to restore “the natural faith of reason in truth.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Indeed, the fundamental quest in and of the university is a search for truth. In a book published not long before he died, *Truth and Truthfulness*, the stridently secular British philosopher Bernard Williams noted that we live in a time when the demand for truth has never been greater. But, he added, we have never been more doubtful about our ability to reach the truth or even whether there is truth to be had. Williams saw the cultural, and particularly academic, despair over truth as a troubling sign. He criticized the ironic distance from which many academics, particularly in the humanities, approached *truth*. If we lose our hold on the truth, he observed, we risk losing everything.[[24]](#footnote-24)

But of course truth can be pursued in the university in such a way that liberal education is ignored or undermined. In his book *Exiles from Eden*, former Chicago University historian and provost at Valparaiso University Provost, Mark Schwehn looks to Max Weber’s famous 1918 address, "Science as a Vocation," for an account of the ideals of modern academic life as inherently specialized, impersonal, value-neutral, and objective.[[25]](#footnote-25) The isolation of the disciplines from one another is not so much regretted as welcomed. The end of education is to produce research that advances knowledge. The Weberian scholar may be secular; that does not mean he neglects ascetic practices. He is what Sheldon Wolin calls the “renunciatory hero.” Pursuing specialized research, the abstemious hero “abandons the delights of the Renaissance and Goethian ideal of the universal man who seeks to develop many facets of his personality and as many different fields of knowledge as possible.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

Weber’s scholar practices a set of virtues, virtues indifferent or hostile an older set of desired character traits: "clarity, but not charity; honesty, but not friendliness; devotion to the calling, but not loyalty to particular and local communities of learning."[[27]](#footnote-27) The modern scholar occupies a place outside of any particular tradition of inquiry. Such a shift is necessary if we are to understand tradition: “we must rationalize it, make it purely an object for impersonal inspection and formal analysis, and once we do that it ceases to be tradition for us.”[[28]](#footnote-28)

On the topic of modernity, Charles Taylor once lamented the easy division of thinkers into knockers and boosters.[[29]](#footnote-29) As a Christian writing about the secular, Schwehn is neither a knocker of secular models, nor a booster of religious models, although he is an adherent of the Christian faith and a participant in the great adventure of Christian education. He does not dismiss the possibility of secular models of education, but he does wonder whether in the current circumstances, secular institutions have the resources to encourage and implement rich practices of liberal education. One of the problems with the modern university is that it suffers from a kind of amnesia about the antecedent and concomitant virtues of character that education needs. Schwehn singles out the virtues of humility, faith, self-denial, and charity. Schwehn is mildly suspicious whether in this secular age "they can be sustained over the course of several more generations absent the affections, practices, and institutions as well as the network of beliefs that gave rise to them originally."[[30]](#footnote-30) That worry that we are living, in parasitic fashion, off of rapidly eroding sources of social and moral capital is a common refrain in the modern period at least since Tocqueville. It is the counter to the Weberian forward looking model that sees in the past mostly things to flee and from which to be liberated. Yet, the most powerful reflections on liberal education in modernity have been tied to a sense of civilization in crisis, of modernity as being as much about loss as it is about gain.[[31]](#footnote-31)

II. Longing Souls

The awareness of loss and absence and the impetus toward recovery and pursuit means that the project of liberal education is not merely oriented toward the past and the handing on of the best that has been thought and said. It involves recovery and rearticulation; more fundamentally, it involves the inculcation of various virtues and the pursuit of wisdom. It is thus future oriented, toward the achievement of an as yet to be realized set of goods. Thus one might add to Schwehn’s list of virtues the virtue of hope, some modicum of which would seem to be required in the souls of students for them even to embark on the path of liberal education. Some students arrive at college thinking they already know all there is to know about the big question or even that there isn’t anything there to be known. Beneath student cynicism about education, there can be a kind of despair, a sense that, even were they to devote themselves to learning, it would not be worth it, that there is no great truth to be discovered, no great transformation to be experienced. Yet many do still desire to experience education as an adventure of discovery. Where there is not currently such longing, there could be if the conditions were more congenial or more demanding. As the current president of Yeshiva University, Richard Joel puts it, as a “new generation comes of age,” youth long “for a life that makes sense.” Many of them experience “profound existential loneliness, while living in a shrinking world that, paradoxically, produces feelings of anonymity.” Joel contends that the university ought to provide an arena in which students can discover and begin to lead lives that make sense. Thus the university would assist students who “yearn for lives of nobility” but are unsure “how to attain them.”[[32]](#footnote-32)

On Schwehn’s model, there is or at least can be a great deal of shared commitment across the divide of sacred and secular regarding liberal education. Faculty should not be content, in Weberian fashion, to "ask only whether what someone says about what a text means is true or false, and what such a saying might imply"; they should "also ask whether what a text says about how we are to live and what we are to do is true or false." Even if they disagree "about the answers to these questions," "they can and should agree, against the Weberians, that such questions should be asked and answered truthfully throughout the academy."[[33]](#footnote-33) For Schwehn, such agreement is or at least ought to be possible across the divide between the religious and secular.

As Schwehn notes, the communal pursuit of truth about important matters, matters that matter for how we live, will presuppose the cultivation of certain virtues. Maritain would say that especially in the young an appreciation of beauty and a self-forgetful love of truth are crucial to the flourishing of human persons. By opening the soul to the whole and to the love of wisdom, liberal education actualizes the in-born capacities of the most peculiar of animals, the animal that is open to the whole and potentially all things (*potens omnia*).

We have already noted Bernard Williams’ case for a recovery of the virtues of truth and truthfulness at the heart of the university. We might well concur with Williams but worry that the scope of his vision of the university is not broad or deep enough to form a truly liberal education. In *Fides et Ratio* (1998), John Paul II made a case for the recovery of a broader and deeper pursuit of truth, for what he calls the sapiential dimension “as a search for the ultimate and overarching meaning of life.” Such a dimension is not just the telos of philosophy itself; it is, in the modern age, a necessary corrective to potentially destructive consequences of the “immense expansion of humanity’s technical capability.” If that capacity is not order to something greater than a merely utilitarian end, it may well prove inhuman.”[[34]](#footnote-34)

In his articulation of what he calls the sapiential perspective, John Paul cites not just the Christian theological tradition, but also pagan philosophy and Eastern religions. That faith and reason are mutually illuminating is the central contention of that work. So, John Paul asserts, on the one hand, "The content of Revelation can never debase the discoveries and legitimate autonomy of reason." One the other, he insists, "Revealed truth offers the fullness of light and will therefore illumine the path of philosophical enquiry." John Paul II’s supposition of harmony is open to the criticism that it obscures from view the tensions and conflicts that philosophers and theologians have often detected between the way of reason and the way of faith. It does serve to underscore a rather paradoxical result or reversal of the relationship between faith and reason in the modern period, which began with reason on the offensive and faith on the defensive. Not exactly a reversal of that position, but something nonetheless paradoxical emerges in papal writings at the end of the 20th century, with faith as the “advocate of reason” attempting to rescue reason from the despairing skepticism pervasive in late secularized modernity.

The encyclical *Fides et Ratio* presents reason and faith quite differently from the guise in which they often appear in contemporary popular culture, low or high. Here a religious impulse to science glares at an equally menacing scientific visage hostile to religion. Indeed, we seem to be moving further from Maritain’s hope for an “end to cleavage between religious inspiration and secular activity.” Without any clear sign of victory on either side, each side is apt to embody what Richard Hofstadter once called the “paranoid style.” Yet, if I am right about the nature of liberal education, then those who embrace it, whether secular or religious, can engage in an at least partially shared project of recovery and rearticulation of varied accounts of the love of wisdom. Thomas Aquinas, for example, in his *Summa Contra Gentiles* develops a detailed description of the similarities and differences between the two traditions of wisdom, both of which pursue wisdom as the actualization of the soul as *potens omnia*. And wisdom, on both views, is about what is ultimate and whole; it is about understanding one’s place within the whole, with an awareness of what one does and does not know, and with a sense that the pursuit of truth with friends, is among the most desirable and noble activities in which human persons can engage. It is also about integration, about seeing parts in relation to one another and to the whole, about the connection between what one knows and how one lives, about what one shares at the deepest level with other members of the species Homo Sapiens.

Liberal education is about pondering what W.E.B DuBois calls the “riddle of existence”—a riddle not soluble in the Weberian modes of inquiry most at home in the research university.[[35]](#footnote-35) Indeed, the pure research university is something of an obstacle to liberal education, whether that education is secular or religious in inspiration or shape. I’d like to suggest that another obstacle is the souls of our students. We can go back to Allan Bloom’s famous *Closing of the American Mind* for a dissection of the purportedly vapid souls of American college students. The intended title for which was “Souls Without Longing.” Understood in the classical era as a longing for the good and beautiful, rooted in recognition of the incompleteness of human nature, *eros* underscores the openness of human reason to the whole. In the modern period, *eros* points not above us to that which completes and ennobles but rather downward, toward the base desires of the Freudian *id* that we suppress for the sake of civilized life. Contrary to the view of dogmatic secularists, religion can often be a dispositive asset, rather than a disruptive vice in the soul of students. It can supply a motive for learning and a hope that truth can be discovered. Yet, religion can also be an obstacle, not only in the way, say, a certain reading of Genesis can impede an embrace of evolutionary biology, but also in the way religious belief is now held by many young persons. In his book, co-authored with Melinda Lundquist Denton, and entitled *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers,* Christian Smith finds that “most U.S. youth tend to assume an instrumental view of religion.  Most instinctively suppose that religion exists to help individuals be and do what they want, and not as an external tradition or authority or divinity that makes compelling claims and demands on their lives.”[[36]](#footnote-36) In place of a grand traditional Christian narrative and transforming personal experience of sin and redemption, religion for most young Christians is about “feeling good, happy, secure, at peace.” It is about “attaining subjective well-being, being able to resolve problems, and getting along amiably with other people.”[[37]](#footnote-37) God is a “combination Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist: He is always on call, takes care of any problems that arise, professionally helps his people to feel better about themselves, and does not become too personally involved in the process.”[[38]](#footnote-38)

But the instrumentality of religion does not involve a cold, explicit calculation, either personal (if I behave as if God existed, I will be better off) or political (public order will be more easily secured, if the citizenry holds some belief in God). Indeed as Smith notes, the religion of American youth is characterized by “therapeutic individualism,” which, “at one level,” is a

reaction against the impersonal, bureaucratic, rationalized, instrumentally utilitarian institutions of modern public life. Its ethos provides a way for moderns to rescue some sense of individual uniqueness, spontaneity, and meaningful emotion in the face of a massive proceduralistic, mechanistic, and alienating public sphere. At another level, therapeutic individualism’s ethos perfectly serves the needs and interest of U.S. mass-consumer capitalist economy by constituting people as self-fulfillment oriented consumers subject to advertising’s influence on their subjective feelings (p. 174).[[39]](#footnote-39)

Smith and his team of researches faced the question whether, and if so how, to define this new religiosity. He writes, “We advance our thesis somewhat tentatively as less than a conclusive fact but more than mere conjecture:  We suggest that the de facto dominant religion among contemporary U.S. teenagers is what we might call ‘Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.’”  He adds, “The creed of this religion, as codified from what emerged from our interviews, sounds something like this:

* A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
* God wants people to be good, nice and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
* The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
* God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.

Good people go to heaven when they die.[[40]](#footnote-40)

Now this conception of religion does not preclude the fostering of certain virtues; indeed, these virtues look very much like the admirable character traits that David Brooks detected in students at Princeton a few years back: tolerance, affability, diligence, and sociability. Brooks also witnessed the students stuttering in response to questions about virtue and vice, as they suddenly turn legalistic and mention codes against cheating, drinking or sexual violence. But Brooks also found a longing for something more than money or success narrowly conceived. Brooks puts the problem in terms of a question:

How do you organize your accumulations so that life does not become just one damn merit badge after another, a series of resume notches without a point? Students hunger for the solution. But that is the one subject on which the authorities are strangely silent.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Brooks concludes, “They live in a country that has lost, in its frenetic seeking after happiness and success, the language of sin and character-building through combat with sin.” If MTD is as pervasive in our religious communities as Smith suggests, religion in many of its most popular forms will not supplement the defects of the secular university’s bracketing of the question of human vice and virtue. In fact, it may inoculate students against liberal education.

III. Recovering Soul

What is missing in the Weberian model of knowledge and in the MTD model of religious belief is the classical understanding of the intellectual soul as *potens omnia*, as reaching our toward a knowledge of the whole, of the human person as the animal that wonders, the animal that is seized by beauty and transported outward and upward. Christians have long seen in this unsettling longing and in failure of any finite good or set of goods, a sign that we are ordered to the divine. As Augustine puts it in opening of the *Confessions*: “Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.”[[42]](#footnote-42) Alexis de Tocqueville, influenced by Augustine indirectly through the daily reading of Pascal, sees in the failure of any finite good or set of goods to satisfy human longing an indication of the naturalness of religion:

The short space of sixty years will never contain the whole imagination of man; the incomplete joys of this world will never be sufficient for his heart. Alone among all beings, man displays a natural disgust for existence and an immense desire to exist; he despises life and fears nothingness. These different instincts push his soul unceasingly toward the contemplation of another world and it is religion which leads him there. Religion is therefore only a particular form of hope, and it is as natural to the human heart as hope itself. It is through a kind of aberration of the intellect, and with the aid of a sort of moral violence exercised upon their own nature, that men abandon religious belief; an irresistible penchant brings them back to it. Unbelief is an accident; faith alone is the permanent state of mankind. *Democracy in America*, abridged with and introduction by Stanford Kessler and translated by Stephen D. Grant, (Hackett Publishing, 200), Part Two, chapter 9, p. 138.

From the perspective of Augustine or Tocqueville, we had reason from the outset to be dubious about the secularization thesis.

Just as there is a debate between faith and reason over the nature of wisdom, so too there is ample room for disagreement over how to understand human eros, over the question of the telos of the human longing to know. Thomas Aquinas devotes a lengthy section of the third book of his *Summa Contra Gentiles* to these debates, debates over the best way of life and who teaches authoritatively about that life. Here there are debates not just between secular and religious but also within each. For us, a more fundamental question emerges, one that touches directly on the possibility, secular or religious, for liberal education: Can we make sense of the soul as *potens omnia*? Without snickering, can we seriously pose to our students the challenge Socrates long ago posed to the Athenians?

You are an Athenian, a citizen of the greatest city with the greatest reputation for both wisdom and power; are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation, and honors as possible, while you do not care nor give thought to wisdom or truth, or the best possible state of your soul?[[43]](#footnote-43)

Can we issue Socrates’ challenge to give more care to the soul than to the body? The word "soul" also figures in the title of Lewis' book about Harvard. But what does Lewis mean by "soul"? It is also there in the title of DuBois' great book, *The Souls of Black Folk*. DuBois takes the term "soul" seriously, as indicating a sense of what is higher and lower, better and worse, in human life, indeed as pointing us in the direction of activities proper to human beings. Can contemporary academics use the term without putting it in scare quotes to indicate its status as a relic from a bygone age of religious primitivism?

These questions are just beneath the surface of Tom Wolfe's satire of the contemporary university in *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, which seizes on the problematic status of the soul in the contemporary university. Wolfe's title character Charlotte Simmons brings with her to Dupont a conception of soul she inherits from her devoutly Christian mother, who uses the word soul without any hint of irony or doubt. By contrast, one of Charlotte's professors, a Nobel winner for his work in neuroscience, uses the term "soul" advisedly. The self, he asserts, is "nothing more than a 'transient composite of materials from the environment.'" “It’s not a command center but a village marketplace, an arcade or a lobby, like a hotel lobby.”[[44]](#footnote-44) In an interesting convergence between the sciences and the humanities, the dissolution of the self into a series of intersecting impersonal forces is also a prominent feature of an influential postmodern philosophy.

Wolfe's book suggests a subtle link between the demotion of the soul to a ghost in a machine and the exhaustion of young adult life in a series of activities – work, study, drinking, sex – lacking any overarching sense of mission. If that is right, then the problems facing the modern university in its attempt to recover its liberal arts mission may be more daunting more intractable than any of its contemporary critics have thus far acknowledged.

1. *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948). p. 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 178. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. W. B. Carnochan, *The Battleground of the Curriculum* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Harry J. Carman, "The Columbia Course in Contemporary Civilization," an address delivered before the Association of History Teachers of the Middle States and Maryland at Bryn Mawr, 2 May 1925, published as a booklet by the Columbia College Dean, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Harry J. Carman, "The Columbia Course in Contemporary Civilization," p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 178. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. These are chapter titles in Timothy Cross’s study of the Columbia curriculum: *An Oasis of Order: the Core Curriculum at Columbia College* (Columbia College, 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Jacques Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943), p. 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Comparisons of visions of the sacred are more common than those of the secular. A good place to start on comparative treatments of the secular is Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007). Whether we live in a secular age has itself been a matter of debate for many years. Sociologists and philosophers from Peter Berger and James Hunter to Jurgen Habermas and Charles Taylor now doubt that our age can be confidently identified as secular. More profoundly, they are skeptical of the secularization thesis that the advance of modernity necessarily leads to secularization. Some go so far as to call our age post-secular. We live, according to Taylor, in an age of a vast array of secular and religious options. Among other works, see Jürgen Habermas, "Secularism's Crisis of Faith: Notes on Post-Secular Society," *New perspectives quarterly*. vol. 25 (2008) p. 17-29; Peter Berger, “Secularization Falsified,” *First Things* (February, 2008); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007); and James K. A. Smith, “Secular Liturgies and the Prospects for a ‘Post-Secular’ Sociology of Religion” in *The Post-Secular in Question: Religion in Contemporary Society*, ed. Philip S. Gorski, et al. New York, NY: New York UP 2012. 159-184. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The title is taken from the opening of the second half of Georges Rouault’s war-time series of prints: *Miserere/Guerre*; *Les ruines elle-memes ont peri*, which is itself borrowed from Lucan’s *Pharsalia*, prompted by the Roman Civil Wars. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 338. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. In the passage quoted earlier in which he gives the date and location of his birth in relation to the Great War, he adds: “Free by nature, in the image of God, I was nevertheless the prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness, in the image of the world into which I was born. That world was the picture of Hell, full of men like myself, loving God and yet hating Him; born to love Him, living instead in fear and hopeless self-contradictory hungers” (p. 3). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. “Learning in War-Time,” in *The Weight of Glory* (HarperOne, 2009), pp. 20-32. He does make some arguments on behalf of the indirect utility of education, for example, that a knowledge of the past gives us “something to set against the present” to temper our sense of its importunate urgency and its unfounded certainties.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Education at the Crossroads, The Terry Lectures Series* (Yale University press, 1960), p. 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See W.E.B. DuBois on the role of liberal education as educating a man not merely an individual fit for this or that craft. You can try to “make just laborers” but “they will not cease to think, will not cease attempting to read the riddle of the world” (p. 73). Conversely, the goal of liberal educaiton is “not to earn meat, but to know the end and aim of that life which meat nourishes” (p. 58). *The Souls of Black Folk*, with an introduction by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Bantam Classic, 1989). Also see William Deresiewicz’s *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducaiton of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life* (Free Press, 2014), whose argument is discussed in a conversation between Deresiewicz and Harry Lewis in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (August 19, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Education at the Crossroads*, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Education at the Crossroads*, p. 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Education at the Crossroads*, p. 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. A corollary of this understanding of the human person, who reaches out in knowledge to apprehend the whole, is that “through love he can give himself freely to beings who are to him, as it were, other selves” (p. 8). The phrasing has Christian overtones but there are anticipation in Aristotle’s account of true friendship, without which human beings would not choose to live and in which the friend is loved for his or her own sake, not merely as a means. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (Ignatius Press, 2009). There is an interesting overlap between the concerns of Catholic authors Pieper and Maritain and those of the Marx of the early essay, “Alienated Labor” in *Marx and Engels, The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, translated by Martin Milligan (Prometheus Books, 1988). Pieper’s widely read *Leisure* celebrates contemplation and denigrates work. For a gentle critique, see Yves Simon’s *Work, Society and Culture*, (Fordham University Press, 1971) in which he argues that the “good worker and the lover of truth have much in common” (p. 187). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Education at the Crossroads*, p. 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *Education at the Crossroads*, p. 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Education at the Crossroads*, p. 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *Truth and Truthfulness* (Princeton University Press, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Weber surfaces throughout *Exiles*, but is the focus on “The Academic Vocation,” pp. 3-21. *Exiles from Eden: Religion and the Academic Vocation in America* (Oxford University Press, 1991). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *Exiles from Eden*, p. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. *Exiles from Eden*, p. 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *Exiles from Eden*, p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Harvard University Press, 1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. For Schwehn’s description of these virtues, see pp. 48-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Sheldon Wolin credits Tocqueville with seeing more than a century ago. Wolin writes that modernity “expunges the rival contexts that give meaning to particularity. The theoretical expression of its monopoly is the triumph of generality, not as a category imposed on a recalcitrant reality, but as the epitaph for a subjugated, dehistoricized reality” whose “governmental counterpart, or temptation, is administrative centralization” with the resulting reduction of the citizen to an “administered being.” *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds: The Making of a Political and Theoretical Life* (Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 97 and 218. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Inaugural Address, September 21, 2003: http://blogs.yu.edu/news/2003/09/21/to-ennoble-and-enable-an-inaugural-vision/. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. P. 19. For an argument that the decline in habits of truth and truthfulness is responsible for the decline of the humanities as respectable intellectual disciplines and a case for how we ought to understand these virtues, see Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness* (Princeton University Press, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. *Fides et Ratio*, Vatican Translation (Pauline Books & Media, 1998), Section 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. *The Souls of Black Folk*, with an introduction by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Bantam Classic, 1989), p. 58. DuBois echoes Socrates. In response to the statement of the god at Delphi, Socrates asks, “Whatever does the god mean? What is his riddle?” (*Apology*, 21b). This is precisely the language DuBois uses in his eloquent description of the nature of true education. DuBois writes, “The riddle of existence is the college curriculum that was laid before the Pharoahs, that was taught in groves by Plato, that formed the trivium and quadrivium, and is to-day laid before the freedman’s sons by Atlanta University. And this course of study will not change; its methods will grow more deft and effectual, its content richer by toil of scholar and sight of seer; but the true college will ever have one goal—not to earn meat, but to know the end and aim of that life which meat nourishes” (p. 58) [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. *Soul Searching,* p. 164.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. *Soul Searching,* p. 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. *Soul Searching,* p. 174. Smith adds, “Mass-consumer capitalism “constitutes the human self in a very particular way: as an *individual, autonomous, rational, self-seeking, cost-benefit-calculating consumer*” (p. 176). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. *Soul Searching,* pp. 162-163. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. “The Organization Kid,” *The Atlantic* (April, 2001). Also see *On Paradise Drive*, pp. 159, 180. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. C.S. Lewis makes a similar point if in a somewhat more apologetic mode:

    The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not in them, it only came through them, and what came through them was longing. These things – the beauty, the memory of our own past – are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have not visited “The Weight of Glory” in The Weight of Glory in *The Weight of Glory* (HarperOne, 2009), pp. 3-19. . [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Plato, *Apology*, translated by G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1981), 29E. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. *I Am Charlotte Simmons* (Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2004), p. 393. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)