

The University Professor

Leonardo Polo

A university professor speaking to university professors about their work is a bit like selling honey to a beekeeper. It is an almost redundant communication, because we all know from experience what it means to engage in this activity. The only advantage I have over you is that my experience is more extensive, since I have been in the university for more than four decades.

The personality of a university professor, the outline of his figure, has to be approached in different ways. It could be helpful to consider the university as a business. And within the business it is common to distinguish two dimensions or two types of people: one called the staff and the other called the production line. The staff consists of people belonging to the business from the point of view of management. The production line is made up of those that are involved in achieving the characteristic result of the business—which is its product.

Every company produces something. If it produces little or with poor quality, that is a sign that it is functioning badly. Although it may have a very good organizational structure, and even though the managers may also be very good, if its producers do not give what they have to give, then the business becomes disfigured and it ends up ruined.

The disfigurement of the business is an issue that is thoroughly addressed in the current literature concerning these institutions. It is often attributed to the excess of staff over the production line. It is not enough for the staff to be thriving if the production line is less so. The businesses that want to survive are turning their attention to improving their ways of doing things. So the first thing to ask is this: What is the product of the university? I insist: If one loses sight of the product of an organization, of an institution, then that institution fails.

The faculty

The product, I repeat, is the responsibility of the production line—and in the university the production line is precisely the faculty. There is no getting around it; this is simply the way it is. Any mistake with regard to this disfigures the university and carries with it an increase in costs that is really significant.

It is useless to count upon large and well-equipped facilities, to take care of relationships with other conditioning entities, if by this one forgets to or does not prioritize the activity of the producer; and the producer in a university is exclusively the professor. Or, as we philosophers say, the professor is the university *simpliciter*; everything else is auxiliary.

No matter how necessary the functions that have to be fulfilled are, the important thing is the improvement of the productive processes. The first consequence is that the professor (speaking in the singular) is the dimension

of the university that most has to be integrated into it. The professors are the ones that most have to make the university their own. For this reason, the university professor is not an ‘upstart’, someone who pops in from time to time, whose main focus is on another activity. In certain situations, one must go to these types of persons; but the part-time university professor is not a university professor.

The profession of being a university professor is incompatible with an eventual or secondary character precisely because of the radical importance of the faculty. Being a university professor is a way of being and builds character. If that character is disfigured, if the possibilities that follow from it are not developed, then the university languishes, its existence becomes purely nominal.

Disfigurement

This disfigurement can come about in several ways. First, it is clear that a state university has a staff ratio that is quite notable, and not within it but precisely above it: It is subject to a state bureaucracy. For this reason, state universities that are often formed by splendid teachers do not achieve a well-defined university profile of their own—precisely because they are subject to an instance that is not really of the university. Although there has to be a connection between politics and the university, what cannot be is a subordination of the latter to former; this is not something good but rather a disruptive element for the university.

Something else that can spoil universities is the profit motive. This is what makes some so-called private universities—which are entities founded with the intention of making money—definitively not fulfil their specific task. It confuses a commercial business with the university. The university is a business; but its product, its objective, is not simply to become rich. The university is characterized by having chosen knowledge over money. Given the option of making money or cultivating knowledge, it sticks to the [latter]. That is why I often say that being a university professor is almost like making a vow of poverty.

Money is an indispensable means that the professor needs for carrying out, at the required level, his tasks. The university should not be in a needy state; it must be able to meet its own needs, those of the family. But the relationship of money to its professional activity is not limited to this. The university professor is not just another professional who studies in order to then achieve certain results with his studies, results that are outside of the university; and this is something that one should think about and draw consequences from.

The activity of the university has to be uncoupled from public powers, from the powers of parties. Loyalty has to be gathered together in the search for the truth. But, on the other hand, neither can one forego a necessary status, which is required by the very dignity of

the task that is developing and for its correct unfolding. Money is not a central issue for this profession. But, on the other hand, it is indispensable; without money almost nothing can be done; this is common sense. But the university professor as such uses the money to make possible the activity whose content I will try to develop.

The product of the university

I repeat the question: What is the product of the university? What good does the university bring to humanity, to society in general? The answer is very clear: What the university contributes to society is *higher learning*.

The development of *higher learning* belongs to the university. On this point confusion should be avoided. I often tell my Spanish colleagues that the universities of my country are not really universities because their product is not *higher learning*; instead, they form a final level of education. In Spain there is a first level of education called basic education, a second level which is the old high school, and the third level which is the university. The university would be something like a continuation of the educational pyramid, a final step or a final level.

But this is not so because there is no continuity between these levels. It is not just a problem of hierarchy; it is something much more serious. The university has *higher learning* as its product. *Higher learning* is not simply a question of instruction. *Higher learning* is characterized in part by its being the result of a long and fruitful accumulation of knowledge achieved through history. The cultivation of knowledge is characteristic, above all, of Western culture.

But precisely because of that, *higher learning* is inexorably open to the future; that is, it has to be increased. For this reason I speak of it as a product. Therefore, the university professor does not function only with acquired knowledge; he is not limited to administering knowledge, to imparting it. It is not the third level of instruction; this is not true.

If the university were to agree to be that, it would crumble, it would cease being a university, and the professors would cease being university professors. They would simply be good professors in the sense of being related to students. Here is another issue that now appears: the student body.

The student body

The formation of students is certainly a product of the university, but it is not the primary one because if it is considered as such it is not sufficiently achieved. The first product of the university is *higher learning*. *Higher learning* is the summit of inherited knowledge. But as always happens in history, what is inherited is never finished but rather needs to be continued.

Knowledge is increasable precisely from its summit. To the extent that knowledge enters into the social current, it makes society function—or can be one more factor for society to function—but this function of knowledge in society is not the increase of *higher learning*.

What must be done with *higher learning*? The first thing that has to be done with *higher learning* is to increase it. Only in the second place must it be extended. This is where the student body enters. Inasmuch as the student body is not strictly speaking group of disciples, it is formed by future professionals who will go about their



An undated painting showing the imposition of a *biretta* during the conferral of a doctoral degree at the Complutense University of Madrid. (The Complutense was originally founded as a *Studium Generale* in 1293, and was later expanded and re-named by Papal Bull in 1499.)

activity outside of the university, taking advantage of this knowledge.

Clearly, producing well-formed people, successfully communicating to them what one knows is very important for society. But even then it is not what is primary. What is primary is to increase *higher learning*. This can also be said like this: If a part of the university tradition goes to society, then the other part of university production goes to history. In my view, this is the most important part. Seen like this, it seems to me that the university professor can become aware of what he has gotten into, on what he has bet his life upon.

The duty of self-formation

It is necessary to realize that being a university professor does not consist solely in obtaining a title, getting hired, forming part of, working at the university. No. Being a university professor means a task of self-formation—because offering services, exercising a profession, and getting situated are not the same thing as attaining the summit of knowledge. This can only be achieved through a long time of study, if one forms the mind well, and if horizons are expanded.

When will this be achieved? Perhaps when one has reached their 40th birthday, a certain maturity has been attained. One must count on five years of the licensure, three or four for the doctorate, and thus we are in the thirties. Then at least ten years more are need to attain the higher level, and from this level to seek to increase it, even if it be in a small measure.

I repeat that what distinguishes the university professor from one that was at the university for a few years and then left, gone to another place, consists in that the knowledge acquired is the basis for his activity, as pure application. This is an application that must also be completed after having left the classroom because there are practical aspects that often times are not taught there. For example, a lawyer requires years of practice to be able to do well in court; the same happens to a doctor in the hospital.

But this knowledge, this undertaking, belongs to the university, and for this reason the professor cannot say: “Now I know and now I am simply going to apply my knowledge to my teaching; I am simply transmitting the knowledge that I have acquired.” No. Being a university professor is not the same as being a lawyer or a doctor at the hospital. It is not the same because their relationship with the development of knowledge is different.

The university professor dedicates himself to being at the cutting edge of knowledge; he has to know everything that relates to his discipline, which naturally takes many years. It is not achieved with a degree and it has to be said that neither is it completely achieved with a doctorate. It is achieved by studying without end until one dies. Studying and thinking, academic life, academic activity, means that nothing must be ignored—at least with regard to the branch that one is dedicated to, with regard to what is known about it up to that moment. It means going deeper into it, since there are always gaps, and to find a way to fill them.

What is the result of this? Until what point does a tenured university professor continue to increase knowledge? This depends on many factors. It depends on his talent, on the opportunities that he has, on the technical means, on a certain type of research, which at times might not exist or exists to a small degree. It also depends on how the library is, since the tradition of knowledge is gathered together in a library. He who cannot count on a good library cannot make use of sources.

This is what a university professor is. For this reason he is a member of an institution that is characteristic of the West, one that is justified and which exists for this—for the importance given to *higher learning*, to the unfolding of knowledge.

Defining higher learning

How can *higher learning* be defined? *Higher learning* is the acquisition of knowledge at the highest level that humanity has acquired at a historic moment. It is clear for example that the *higher learning* with regard to physics was different in Aristotle’s days than it is today.

What can be added to *higher learning*? It would already be enough that it not be forgotten, that it not decay. This requires a considerable effort. It is not about being original, not about winning the Nobel Prize. But neither is it about taking this attained level as a horizontal level. This means that the *higher learning* is the primary product without which the university is no more than a third stage of instruction.

One has to be in on the cutting edge; there is no other remedy. And what is the cutting edge? Each one has to know the cutting edge, since it changes with age; but to the degree that each one can say that they have all the historical precedents of this project, from there he must try to go beyond—and transmit it to the other university professors, not only to the students who will later develop their activities outside.

For this reason a university professor has to publish. Here the following difficulties arise. Often times what is communicable is little; everything one has to say, the way it has been assimilated, and how one has made one’s personal mark on *higher learning* can perhaps be expressed in a 50-page article.

For this reason the journals in which research is published are indispensable. A university that is growing must create journals, must have a publishing house, literature dedicated to a group, to university professors of other centres. A university professor can also publish popular books, articles in newspaper; if he has the literary talent he can put his thoughts into rhetorical form in such a way that a less cultivated mind understands them. But strictly speaking, included among the audience of the publications of a university professor are other university professors. A university professor has to read what others write; and this is because something called *res publica scientiarum* exists.

Science is a public thing. *Higher learning* is communicated; *higher learning* is published. It is published with one requirement: copyright. One cannot plagiarize.

But strictly speaking, intellectual property does not exist because the destiny of what one knows is that it is known by others: interlocutors.

One should aspire to enter the universal public res. Knowledge is res that is common to those who cultivate it, not to others. Not of the university but of all. If this is not taken into account, if this does not constitute the foundation, the vital unfolding, of a university professor, then the teaching activity is ruined, since one teaches people that know nothing of the knowledge that is cultivated in the university. Precisely for this reason the university is not simply the third degree of instruction.

The difference should be strongly experienced. The student should notice that what is taught at a university (if it is an authentic university) is taught in a certain way, with a certain knowledge and with a depth that was, until now, unknown to him. This corresponds to what I am saying: What nourishes university education is research.

The importance of research

The university professor who prepares his classes with notes, outlines that he himself made, and these outlines are the same every year, after a few years the paper which was at first white has turned yellow. This is a sign that he is not an authentic university professor but rather someone lazy. This person has “fallen down on his paunch”, as we say in Spain. He has become embedded in an institution, lives in it and from it. He can be vested with university gowns, the insignias, the “doctor’s cap”; but the question continues being the

same: And your class outlines? Every year one must incorporate into them something—precisely what one has read, what one has researched, what one has learned.

If this is not done, then the result is badly formed professionals. This affects the average level of a country, the activities done by the students who have come from university centres that are the ones that rule at the highest level of the activities of society. For this reason the university professor who falls into routine does harm to society.

But, so as not to fall into routine it is not enough to think directly of the social effects of one’s activities; rather, one must think precisely of the development of *higher learning*. If this is thought about, then one will always be in a position to improve one’s teaching and also in a position to obtain successors—obtaining successors who are not inferior but rather superior. The successor’s own position is one of the most acute concerns of a good professor which has to grow naturally as time passes. The successor: If the person who is going to take my chair is not better than I am, if the *higher learning* that I have provided to him is not a point of departure for him because I have not given him everything that I know, then he cannot be a good successor.

That is, in the *res publica scientiarum*, there is always more, an increase. There is so much that has recently been published in every branch of knowledge that exhausting the bibliography can be overwhelming, even though as is clear, some things that are published are really useless, they are simply a waste of paper.



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The late Leonardo Polo (1926-2013) closely reading a text during a break in one of the hallways of the University of Navarre in Pamplona, where he taught ethics, natural law, the history of philosophy, and psychology.

The reality of truth

It seems to me that the preceding observations are rather clear; they form an approach that almost does not need to be insisted upon. In any case, it would be good to point out that one thing is the true reality of an institution and another is its empirical situation. This is a philosophical question that has to be kept in mind. Reality is the reality of truth; its empirical specification is always inadequate.

Hegel put it this way: There are two levels, experience and concept, and the whole secret of philosophy consists in elevating experience to concept. If experience is not elevated to concept, then nothing is left except experience, which means nothing since it is not elevated to concept. This happens frequently.

It must be kept in mind that one is not always in the same phase or state. One can never say that the product of the university, *higher learning*, has been definitively achieved. One is always at some phase. Totally fulfilling it is impossible within history. This is one of the reasons why knowledge sometimes becomes dispersed or branches out too much, the contributions are small and sectarian.

For this reason we have gone through a long period of specialization. This period is fortunately coming to a close. Now, interdisciplinarity—a motto that is still vague and without clear outlines—is imposing itself. That which is cultivated in a particular field has increasingly wider reign. The future is in the convergence of the different fields of knowledge. After living an era of specializations, we have moved on to another era or attempts at inquiry, of unity of knowledge. There are isomorphisms, as it is said today, between one branch and another. And it has also been discovered that some complete others. One cannot put on blinders because even though he knows that he cultivates, it is not cultivated well.

One must also take into consideration that the development of the university is both institutional as well as personal. Both are intimately linked, given that the key to a university institution is its professors. For

this reason the institution is the result of the professors' state and vice versa. There are parallels between the level attained by the institution and what one can do.

For this reason the university is never satisfied, it knows that the march, the evolution, the institutional progress is slow. If the biographical time necessary for attaining a certain maturity is, as I have said, very long, then the time for institutions is slower. Institutions do not mature overnight, but they can if they start well and stick to the right path, they can progress ever more quickly.

Hope and patience

For this reason another characteristic of the university professor is patience. This entails dedicating oneself to the university for life. The person who has no patience also does not have tenacity. A great amount of patience, a never giving up is required. The university professor who is disillusioned, who says: "This is going really slow, it's stuck or semi-stuck; therefore, I am going to dedicate myself just to teaching, to transmitting from one generation to another the same thing, in such a way that the papers become increasingly yellow; this is what my life is about", has discouraged himself. He has ceased having the tension of a university professor.

Because the university professor is not measured so much by where he has reached, but rather by the effort that he put into getting there. Hegel distinguishes between two types of passion. The burning passion and the cold passion: Which is more intense? Clearly the cold one, because if the burning passion is lost, the ardour disappears; in contrast, the cold passion continues despite being cold. What is specific to a university professor is that he sets very high goals, but with great patience.

It is not specific of the university professor to give up, to be pessimistic, to become bitter about life, to become disillusioned. Because no matter how strong the hopes that one has are, their fulfilment is greater. Hopes can never collapse. The initial hopes are not sufficiently hopes. One becomes ever more hopeful, the



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Leonardo Polo with students and colleagues during an academic meeting at the University of Navarra.

hope becomes colder, but never less intense.

Another thing that should be noted is the issue of prestige. The prestige of a university is inseparable from the quality of its professors, and the quality of its professors is inseparable from the way the university functions. Prestige is not a result of ever more abundant carob trees, excellent weather, the environment. Rather, it is due to the quality of the professors, and the quality of the professors is due to the quality of the university. It is, in turn, important to keep in mind that personal prestige is inseparable from the institution itself.

One should not seek out personal triumph based on the institution; it would be a type of unjust enrichment. Instead one must seek it out so that the university be evermore well known. It is not an act of generosity; rather, it is a consequence of the solidarity that is inherent to the condition of being a tenured professor, of a university professor in the strict sense.

What is important is that the institution move forward, that it be better led, and then one must invest one's effort into it, because it is clear that if I publish, if I am recognized, if I have access to congresses, if I maintain a dialogue on a world-class level in the cultivation of *higher learning*, then in the end these contribute to the prestige of one's institution.

It is important to avoid every motive that leads to division, among which one finds above all disillusion, the phases of life in which one passes through some type of crisis. It is almost impossible that clouds not appear on the horizon at some point of a university career. Here I would add another idea: He who has not gone through a crisis during his career does not know what a university professor is.

And what is the crisis of a university professor? It is thinking that one is a fool or thinking that one knows nothing. Or thinking now I've reached this point and now, where do I go? He who has not at some point thought that he is a fool is not dealing with *higher learning*. What is happening is that one is banging their head against the wall and then will sometimes say: The truth is that I know little. It is evident. One must know how to make a diagnosis: I am in a phase and I am trying to get to a new level; the outlines still cannot be seen clearly. Tenacity lies in this; patience has to be exercised with oneself. In Spain it is said that "Zamora wasn't taken in an hour." Passing through a crisis is unavoidable; they can be identity crises.

Doctoral work

Here at the end I will say something about the doctoral dissertation. The doctoral dissertation, if it is an authentic doctoral dissertation, is the first work done with a certain maturity; and doing one demands reading, reuniting, presenting things in a suggestive way, understanding comprehensively, with a critical assessment. The doctoral dissertation is a complicated work. But on the other hand, if it is a work of research, it can be followed by others. But at the level that one has at this age, the age when one does the doctoral dissertation, the doctoral dissertations are at times too

monographic and then the problem of continuity arises.

A doctor can arrive at the conclusion of how he had to considerably limit the scope of his considerations and had to spend a good amount of years on it; at the end when he has obtained the title of doctor the rest has been forgotten and he finds herself a bit disorientated. Then the question arises: "And now what do I do?" The only advice that can be given in this situation is to go back and remember what has been forgotten. This is the first measure that should be taken.

This is, of course, co-natural with human life, which is not a straight line; living is a rectifying, a correcting. The history of knowledge is full of corrections; many hypotheses have turned out to be false, others not. There are many mistakes throughout the history of science, but these errors are a starting point. Errors are also useful.

On the other hand, pure research has to be distinguished from applied research. Pure research is at the heart of scientific progress; applied research has a useful character and therefore can better be solved, although pure research is the soul—I insist—of research. At the very least one must be aware of what others are doing, because the life of someone in the university consists in never separating herself from *higher learning*.

The love for the truth

The great contribution of a university professor, his great product, is ultimately to produce the elites. These are completely different across countries, according to whether the university formation received was a serious formation or rather a mediocre one. But I repeat, this is included in or is embraced by research—that is, by the love for the truth. That is what is most important in the formation of a human being.

This is how the university fulfils its social function, because this is what is reflected in the teaching and this is what makes the people who have gone through the university and have not stayed in it because they are doing useful activities in other social sectors, have nostalgia for the university. The university for which they do research will know how to recycle, that is, it will readmit them and they will not find themselves in something foreign.

The love for the truth, I insist, is what is most important in the formation of a human being. There is no ethics possible, no right conduct, if one does not love the truth because wrong conduct consists in accepting a lie into one's life. "The truth will set you free", says the Gospel. It is in this way that the university fulfils its great societal task, forming useful men and women—whose usefulness can be measured, above all, in terms of the truth.

Leonardo Polo (1926-2013) was a Spanish philosopher, He taught generations of students at the University of Navarre in Pamplona. This essay was originally published in El profesor universitario (UDEP, 1996). It was translated by Silvia Martino, Eduardo Fay and Alberto I. Vargas. It appears here by permission from the Leonardo Polo Institute of Philosophy.