

## What's the Matter with Footnotes?

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Should graduate students—and even many professors—really be trying to solve the world's problems before they know enough about their own discipline? Mark C. Taylor disparages academic specialization as “more and more about less and less,” as if specialization requires small-mindedness and lack of intellectual ambition. But specialization is not always-already narrowness; if it were, then the academic collaboration that Taylor extols would entail locking several blinkered professors in a room and hoping they come up with answers to global problems. Could they even communicate with one another in mutually comprehensible terms? If they could, then they would not be what Taylor says they are. If scholars are to band together and use their various forms of expertise to fight, for example, climate change and international conflict, those individual scholars need expertise in their fields in the first place. It is the very nature of “expertise in their fields” that requires further attention.

Disciplinary boundaries are problematic and, perhaps increasingly, restricting, but they also serve purposes. Disciplinary norms exist for reasons: they tell us what questions to ask, what methods to use, and what counts as evidence. In Stanley Fish's characterization, “I am *professionally* correct, not out of a sense of moral obligation or choice of values ... but out of a sense that the structure of a fully articulated profession, be it negligence law or literary criticism, is such that those who enter its precincts will find that the basic decisions, about where to look, what to do, and how to do it, have already been made” (Fish 1995, 44). The average academic professional is not—and should not be—interested in revolutionizing the profession but in simply practicing it, doing what Thomas Kuhn called “normal science,” which “does not aim at novelties of fact or theory and, when successful, finds none” (Kuhn 1996, 52). Scholars within disciplines apply the latest techniques and theories to the extant data. But it is not clear what will constitute “normal science” under Taylor's new academic regime.

Taylor's own work is innovative and multidisciplinary in the best ways. His work is distinguished by its range, depth, and its embrace of past, present, and future. He knows this of himself: “As I move from theology to philoso-

phy, to literary criticism, to art, to architecture, to technology, to economic systems, and now to biological systems, it is all interconnected. But the very structure of education in America—not only in America, but America is where I live—people don't know enough about enough to be able to put the pieces together. It is a culture of expertise, which is," as he says again in his *New York Times* op-ed, "more and more about less and less" (Taylor 2008). He cites the example of "a meeting of political scientists who had gathered to discuss why international relations theory had never considered the role of religion in society. Given the state of the world today, this is a significant oversight" (Taylor 2009). He is too kind; such an "oversight" could only be willful, an expression of preference; there is nothing inherent to the study of political science that precludes the study of religion. For all too long, many social scientists avoided religion with the same intensity that, for example, many humanities scholars avoid mathematics and many scientists avoid politics. Not everybody can be good at everything, and most of us thrive by playing to our strengths, but our disciplinary boundaries represent the world as we want to see it: departmentalized, supposedly guaranteeing we will all leave one another alone. Taylor is right to want to rock this boat.

At the same time, the existence of blind spots in a discipline's practitioners is not an argument for the abolition of the discipline itself. In order to do good work in one's own field, as Taylor does, one must have some knowledge of other fields—one must have, in short, a good liberal arts education, in the full sense of that education continuing throughout one's life and career. A scholar of religion who only studies religion (and not philosophy or art or economics or sociology) will produce very limited work. But this is not the narrowness of which Taylor complains. "In my own religion department," he writes, "for example, we have 10 faculty members, working in eight subfields, with little overlap" (Taylor 2009). However, a quick perusal of the Faculty Directory for Columbia University Department of Religion reveals several excellent scholars, many of whom write popular works as well as scholarly tomes, all of whom have the necessary familiarity with various disciplines that enables them to do quality academic research. What makes them different from their chair, Mark C. Taylor? They each study a specific religion, not "Religion" itself. Therefore, they also incorporate *history* into their research, a field curiously absent from Taylor's description of his own multidisciplinary work. Taylor's work is, increasingly, preoccupied with the future; the past, it seems cannot justify itself on its own terms. This may be why Taylor bemoans the gifted graduate student who studies Duns Scotus' use of footnotes.

Admittedly, if our best scholars are studying the history of scholarship,

then perhaps higher education has entered its decadent phase. But the study of footnotes can also be a form of useful self-consciousness and reflexivity, just the kind Taylor calls for when he invites us “to examine the conditions necessary for [religions’] formation and to consider the many functions they serve,” in order to “develop responsible analyses of religion’s diversity and complexity” (Taylor 2008). The traditions of commentary are a crucial part of the world’s religions, and if someone has brilliant insight into Duns Scotus’ habits of citation, then what is Taylor’s problem, exactly? I do not know if Taylor would express the same derision for, say, a study of footnotes in U.S. Supreme Court opinions or U.N. Statements on Climate Change.<sup>1</sup> Taylor’s dismissal of such research places him a bit closer to the religion-phobic political scientists he himself criticizes. He implies that there is nothing about religion *in itself* worth studying *on its own terms*.

If good disciplinary work is, by definition, multidisciplinary— if a good historian also knows political science and/or literature and/or psychology, just as a good sociologist knows economics and/or architecture and/or mathematics—then each scholar working in a particular discipline is going to need other scholars to be working in other disciplines. For undergraduates in the humanities and social sciences, we can encourage more breadth: just as every young chemist is required to study mathematics, biology, and physics as well as chemistry, we can require every young aspirant to the humanities and social studies to study a broad curriculum, not just as distribution requirements but as a necessary qualification for the more specialized studies that lie ahead. At the graduate and professional level, instead of abolishing departments, it might be better advised to create and maintain more cross-disciplinary forums, and to encourage departments to reward their members for stretching themselves and their fields.

Taylor has a fine idea when he calls for academic collaboration for the purpose of engaging pressing global concerns. But we already have foundations, conferences and committees wherein major academics make recommendations to policymakers.<sup>2</sup> American higher education is already given to fads and trends of fashion, and, I fear, Taylor’s suggestion that we create “problem-focused programs” would mean even more wild swings of attention to whatever grabs our—or our sponsors’—passing fancies. Who decides what is or is not a “problem”? What if a particular field—such as art history, literary criticism, or philosophy—does not demonstrate its usefulness when academe becomes a source of public-advice-giving and little else? If academic study must be useful, then to what and for whom?

Taylor’s suggestion that we abolish traditional academic departments and

form ad-hoc committees on big issues could lead to the same problems that accompanied the emergence of Cultural Studies: professors with some knowledge of literature, history, philosophy, sociology, etc., started to write about billboards and television shows and supermarkets, and their students followed suit, but many of those students did not first learn much about literature, history, philosophy, or sociology in the first place. Cultural Studies offers, in place of knowledge or expertise, a set of methodological tools and political preferences. The same fate could befall the Interdisciplinary Ad Hoc Renewable Program on Water or the Conditionally Temporary Committee for the Study of Time. If we are to abolish traditional academic departments and replace them with multi- and inter-disciplinary committees, and those committees consist of scholars from various disciplines, we must be clear then about what kinds of students such committees will produce. Perhaps a few polymaths may emerge, but probably also a few dilettantes and factotums.

The work of historians, biologists, economists, and so on, can be helpful for any number of world-repairing projects, but, as Fish writes, “we become *interested* in something [...] and it is usually *later*, under the pressure of anxieties created by the demand for justification, that we tell ourselves a story in which the pursuit of our interest is crucial for the improvement of the human condition” (Fish 1995, 59). One can imagine Taylor telling himself such a story, after he had been studying religion professionally for several years. But now that he has come to a later stage of his life, he would deny the rest of us such personal and professional development. There are career-tracks for those who wish to “make a difference,” and academe is probably not one of the best-suited for such goals. When Fish refers to “the pursuit of our interest,” he does not use it (strictly) in the political sense of “what we think is best for ourselves” but rather as “what draws us in, what intrigues us, what demands our study and contemplation.” When Taylor beseeches us to use our knowledge for the good of mankind, *and nothing else*, he places the useful over the interesting. It may dishearten some people to hear that “Some humanists rank what promises to be ‘fascinating’ above what may turn out to be ‘true’” (Lamont 2009, 61), but I would not hesitate to add “and beneficial” as well.

As for Taylor’s recommendation for the abolishment of tenure, he has my sympathy. Tenure is, too often, a license for mediocrity and atrophy, and tenured faculty too often act like a privileged aristocracy, assembling their privileges while cheap graduate students and adjuncts teach with no benefits and little hope for a real academic career. It did not have to be like this, but it is. But universities will not change until they have to; tenure will not be reformed for the same reasons that the Electoral College will not be

reformed: everyone in a position to fix the system is the protected beneficiary of that very system. But that will not matter in the coming years; as banks and businesses fail, universities will follow, and charitable giving to higher education will only decrease with the expiration of the Estate Tax in 2010. Tenure itself may remain, but many tenured lines will fall, not due to Taylor's calls for reform, but to "financial exigency." Elite institutions will continue as they have, perhaps combining a few departments but not abolishing them all. Less prominent colleges and universities, however, will very well see themselves replaced by online courses and professional-skills institutions like Strayer University, Kaplan University, and the University of Phoenix. Pedagogical priorities will follow technology and economics, not the other way around. Taylor, ever mindful of the future, is already prepared.<sup>3</sup>

## Notes

1. I was once instructed—in graduate school—to get the 2-volume Dover edition of John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* because it included Alexander C. Fraser's brilliant commentary, which retained its interest and usefulness despite being from the 19th century. Furthermore, Anthony Grafton's excellent *The Footnote: a Curious History* (1997) presents a fascinating cultural history via this much-maligned academic tool.
2. These policy recommendations are generally ignored, if not ridiculed. Richard Posner notes, among many other cases, "the 'philosophers' brief' submitted by Ronald Dworkin, John Rawls, Thomas Nagel, and other philosophers in the Supreme Court's assisted-suicide cases is not mentioned in any of the opinions in those cases" (Posner 2003, 361). Posner elsewhere notes that it would be "unprofessional" (Posner 2003, 363) for judges and other government officials to accept recommendations from professional academics.
3. Taylor, along with Coca-Cola executive Herbert A. Allen, is the founder of the Global Education Network. "Since 1999, Global Education Network has been creating and developing cutting-edge multimedia courses for students to take on their computers" (<http://www.gen.com/aboutus/>). This for-profit company will be in an excellent market position once universities realize that paying professors (or graduate students) to give standard-issue lectures is unnecessary when DVD-ROMs provide the same content at a fraction of the cost.

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