

A Second Look At University Learning:
A Response To Professors
Meilaender, Nolley, and Wells
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The *Conversation on the Liberal Arts* at Westmont College on January 19-21, 2001 was a delightful occasion. I learned a great deal from it, and wish to thank the three educators who responded to my paper. Their comments were perceptive and helpful, even if there are a few points where I disagree.

Before moving to his central criticisms, Gilbert Meilaender mentions several points of disagreement with me that he did not have the space to develop. I am genuinely sorry that he was not able to expand on these ideas, because I would have taken it as axiomatic that university graduates need to know how to work as a team and should be encouraged to do original thinking. I would love to know what Professor Meilaender was thinking in opposing these ideas. I agree with him, however, that finding a unifying worldview will only be possible for a few colleges and universities, viz., the Christian ones—a point I made in my original paper.

But on the more crucial points, Professor Meilaender is clearly not a big fan of mission statements or lists of goals for institutions of higher education; he sees them as likely only to give failing grades to most institutions and as popular only with *outcomes assessment* bureaucrats. But it seems to me obvious that we educators need to know what we are trying to accomplish, whether our goals are worthwhile, and whether we are attaining them. And it seems that a degree of sensible planning can be helpful.

In addition, I argued in my paper that the contemporary university no longer sees itself as a moral teacher, except on certain points that are of doubtful coherence. Professor Meilaender replies that he knows certain faculty members whom he would not like to be moral teachers of students. But that hardly responds to what I was saying. My point was that all institutions of higher education ought to follow the lead of the Christian colleges in trying to give their students a sense of personal, civic, and global moral responsibility. The fact that there are immoral professors does not refute that point at all.

And I do not see how Professor Meilaender's argument that since there are immoral professors in academia we should eschew trying morally to influence students is consistent with another point that he insists on, viz., that college students come to us already morally formed. If the second point is true, presumably it should not matter at all to Professor Meilaender that some professors make poor moral examples or even teach immorality.

It is true that college students are already morally formed when we first see them, but that does not mean that they cannot be further formed. It is true that *Can morality be taught?* is a difficult question. And I surely agree that simply studying the virtues does not necessarily make you more virtuous. But I am convinced that virtue can be taught, even by college professors, because it was taught to me. There were two or three professors

who, long ago when I was an undergraduate, had a strong moral impact on my life—an impact that continues to this day.

There is nothing in Professor Nolley's fine response to which I want to take major exception. As a fellow Kurosawa fan, I enjoyed reading his analysis of *Rashomon*. I also thought it was helpful, in our discussion, to hear the comments of someone who spends most of his time as an administrator rather than an instructor.

Professor Wells is (I admit) much more enamored of postmodern themes than I am. But I am puzzled by his charge that in my paper I regard students as "universal people" with no particular national, social, gender, or class location. Since I do not hold this view at all—I am as aware as anyone that every human being is historically, socially, racially, sexually, etc. located—I can only conclude that Professor Wells raises this criticism simply because in my main paper I did not happen to talk about the subject of social location.

Moreover, Professor Wells does not make it clear how his point bears on the discussion at hand. Suppose, contrary to fact, that I do think of students as *universal people from nowhere*. Exactly how does that damage my overall argument?

And I would like to ask Professor Wells whether his apparently absolute claim (he says we all know it to be *true*) that *knowledge is socially constructed* is itself socially constructed. If it is not, if the claim is simply true whatever anyone may think, then his epistemology is self-refuting. Here is a knowledge-claim—i.e., the knowledge-claim that *all knowledge is socially constructed*—that is not socially constructed. If the claim that *knowledge is socially constructed* is itself socially constructed, i.e., is just somebody's social construct, why should those of us who disagree with it pay any serious attention to it?

This is not just a logician's game. If there is a deep incoherence at the heart of postmodernism, then that viewpoint (despite the several valuable things that I am quite prepared to admit I and others have learned from it), must be rejected as a worldview. Indeed, I am suspicious of postmodernism because I am convinced that in the end it cannot avoid embracing some version of moral relativism.