Gnosticism, Progressivism and the (Im)possibility of the Ethical Academy

Abstract

There is growing concern today with the state of ethics in higher education as it relates to everything from increasing corporate influence and widespread use of questionable research methods, to cheating and plagiarism committed by students and faculty alike. Multiple studies, from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, have recently approached the question of academic ethics in the hopes of identifying some of the fundamental problems confronting universities while advancing possible solutions for improving conduct across the academy. This article seeks to contribute to this discussion by analyzing the current state of ethics in higher education through an engagement with the concept of gnosticism - a term that refers most notably today to the modern compulsion to 'fix' an inherently fractured and malformed world.

Utilizing the work of Del Noce (2017; 2014), Voegelin (1987; 1968), and Rosmini (1988), this article focuses on providing a critique of the current state of the academy in relation to ethics, drawing parallels between the gnostic roots of 20th century totalitarianisms and current progressive ideology endemic to higher education. While primarily serving as a critique of contemporary progressivism in the academy, this article will also argue for the need to reconstruct a transcendental ethics as a response to the current ethical crisis countenanced by modern gnosticism.

Introduction

Recently, there have been a number of key studies that have attempted to address the question of ethics in the academy (Atkins & Van Houweling 2002; Eckstein, 2003; Callhan, 2004; Moore, 2006; Gallant Bertram, 2008, 2011; Kennan, 2015). What these particular works have demonstrated is that there is growing concern related to everything from corporate influence and questionable research methods in higher education, to cheating and plagiarism committed by students and faculty alike. Although these specific studies approach the question of academic ethics from different disciplinary and theoretical perspectives they all attempt to identify the fundamental problems confronting universities and to offer up possible solutions for improving conduct across the academy.

Ethics can be understood as the ability to distinguish between morally good and morally bad behaviour. According Antonio Rosmini (1988), ethics is the 'science of virtue', that 'brings together in orderly fashion the norms according to which human actions have to be regulated, and that illustrates the relationship between these actions and their norms' (p. xiii). The fundamental purpose of ethics, or

what Rosmini calls 'the first moral principle', is nothing more than the promotion of the morally good and the avoidance of its antithesis (ibid.).

The recent interest in the question of ethics as it relates to academic life appears to be a direct response to increases in what is generally understood to be immoral behavior including: 1) scientific and research fraud (Jha, 2012; Brainard, 2008; Monastersky, 2008); 2) student cheating (Marsh, 2018); and 3) plagiarism (Parker et al., 2011), among other issues. While there is widespread agreement that academic misconduct is a genuine problem that seems to be increasing in frequency, there is less certainty regarding the causes and potential solutions to these problems.

Some studies (Duderstadt, Atkins, and Van Houweling 2002) suggest that a rise in academic misconduct as it relates to student behavior, research, and teaching is directly related to the increasing use of new technologies and the associated inability of institutions of higher education to provide effective guidance and oversight concerning its use. Other studies apply a broader, systemic perspective to university ethics. Callhan (2004) and Eckstein (2003) for example, suggests that there are global, international issues such as increasing hyper-competitiveness, growing socio-economic inequality, and endemic political corruption that have had an adverse effects on a range of social institutions including universities. Similarly, Bertram Gallant (2008; 2011) and Kennan (2015) suggest that much of the academic misconduct currently taking place at universities is a product of systemic 'cultural issues' that necessitate a radical rethinking of the internal operations and organizational procedures of universities. In many ways, these studies reflect the prevailing analysis of ethics that is often located within a more general critique of the effects of neoliberalism on higher education (e.g. Giroux, 2013; Mahony & Weiner, 2017).

While there is some disagreement regarding whether or not the roots of unethical behaviour is primarily located at the systemic or individual level, there appears to be agreement that what is lacking in universities is ethics itself. In other words, most researchers have proposed that the specific cases of misconduct in universities is a direct result of the fact that ethics and ethical considerations are lacking and subsequently need to assume a more prominent presence in the academy. Although I agree with the collective sentiment that there is a growing urgency to address academic misconduct, I disagree that the existence of an ethical framework in universities today is somehow lacking. Instead, I argue that the ethical impetus of universities is quite clear, and that the problem is not specifically related to the absence of ethics from university life, but rather its relegation to a limited sphere (often personal) and its misguided relationship to the world.

Similarly, although there are systemic issues related to academic misconduct that may be attributable to the increasing influence of 'neoliberal' ideology on higher education, I want to suggest that the problems run deeper than that. In other words, I will argue that the problems associated with ethical misconduct will not be resolved through undermining the perceived sovereignty of the market, but only through a radical reconsideration of the relationship between the world, and the values we espouse.

As a result, my primary intention with this article is to provide a critique of the way that ethics is currently formulated in the university system, while also providing a brief glimpse into a conception of ethics that institutions of higher education could develop in order to curtail the kinds of academic misconduct we see in operation today. What I will demonstrate in this article is how the current university system creates an environment reinforced by a conception of ethics oriented toward the promotion of the therapeutic instead of the common good. More specifically, I will show how the possibility for developing an ethical framework that works in promotion of the common good is dependent on a reorientation of our relationship to the world that is capable of overcoming the influence of modern gnosticism.

In the following, I begin with a brief historical overview of the concept of gnosticism, followed by a critique of the way that the contemporary presence of gnosticism affects the formulation and practice of ethics. Finally, I introduce the transcendental ethics of Antonio Rosmini as a possible framework for permanently abating the kinds of misconduct that have resulted from the presence of contemporary gnostic thought in academia today.

Gnosticism and Values

For 20th Century political philosopher Augusto Del Noce (2014; 2017), gnosticism is fundamentally a rebellion against the world. It is the belief that there is nothing worth preserving, and that the order of the world is nothing but a reflection of the existence of rigid and tyrannical laws. The original Gnostics that emerged in the 1st and 2nd Century and thrived in the Mediterranean broke away from Christianity and denounced the material world while elevating experiential aspects of communion with the divine as the primary focal point of their practice and belief. No longer was the concept of sin the focal point of religious contemplation, but rather the concept of ignorance that could be overcome by generating intimate knowledge of the divine within this life.

For the original Gnostics, providence was completely denied. No longer was God understood to exist analogically to the material world, but instead conceived of as something completely alien to our material reality. This is not to say that the original Gnostics did not believe in order (or *Logos*), but instead of understanding *Logos* as the divine order of being that lies within all creation, the material world (including our physical bodies) was understood to be an abomination. As an abomination, the world was posited as the creation of an alien God and thus something to be rejected in full. In other words, because the world was already irredeemably corrupt, spiritual practice for the ancient Gnostics was directed toward the salvation of souls in preparation for the world to come following death.

The link between original gnosticism and contemporary society can be difficult to discern specifically because the prioritization of the experience of communion with the divine during the 1st and 2nd Centuries would appear to have little in common with a modern, secularized world, and even less to contemporary university life. This is specifically why the work of Augusto Del Noce and Eric Voegelin (to a lesser extent) is so important. Not only are they able to shed light on the prevailing 'spirit of gnosticism' and its effect on our contemporary world, but they also provide us with insight into why this 'spirit' prohibits the formation of values that would be capable of eradicating the kind of misconduct inherent to academia today.

For both authors, while contemporary gnosticism is similar to ancient gnosticism in the way that it conceives of the world as something in dire need of reconstitution, the gnostic spirit of today is not primarily focused on the salvation of souls in this world. Yes, the idea that the world is an abomination is also innate to contemporary gnosticism. However, for contemporary Gnostics (unlike the ancients), this abomination is redeemable. Furthermore, unlike the ancient Gnostics who retained the belief that the material world reflected order, contemporary Gnostics proposed the opposite-that the world was born in chaos and is in need of the establishment/creation of an improved order. The result is that contemporary gnosticism is most notable in its modern compulsion to 'fix' the inherently fractured and malformed world. While ancient Gnostics preserved the supernatural element of Christianity while eliminating the possibility of worldly transformation, contemporary Gnostics eliminate the supernatural element of Christianity but retain the possibility of radically transforming the world.

The spirit of gnosticism has remained the same throughout history in the sense that the materially given is an anathema. However, another key difference between the two is that for the ancient Gnostics redemption is only possible in the after-life, while contemporary Gnostics believe that self-redemption is possible in this world through the enactment of specifically formulated projects of social engineering tied to unquestionable truths, and an irrefutable cognitive mastery of the world.[i]

These projects contain within them the promise of the rehabilitation of the world and the creation of a 'new' humanity absent of its original abhorrent qualities.[ii] This is what Voegelin (1952) famously described as the 'immanentization of the Christian eschaton' (p. 121)- which refers to the way that knowledge or gnosis can be actualized in order to bring about a state which had previously been limited to the transcendental sphere of the afterlife.[iii]

For Del Noce (2014, 2017), the transition from ancient to contemporary gnosticism is marked most specifically by the emergence of secularization and atheism - two core ideological positions that formed the basis of modernity and the corresponding elevation of reason as the primary, and only source of genuine knowledge.[iv] Within modernity, reason and science came to replace cognitio fidei- a reference not to knowledge derived from faith, but rather faith understood as knowledge itself (see Thomas Aquinas 2014, and Edith Stein 2000). In other words, the advent of modernity brought with it the dissolution of knowledge specifically concerned with matters not available to natural reason. This primary reformulation of European metaphysics toward atheism is also reflected within the most common conception of the history of philosophy that understands genuine knowledge as that which emerges out of the shadows of superstition-a development of thought that is often cited as beginning with Descartes and reaching its apex with Nietzsche and the 'death of God.'

The key features of this transition are identifiable only to the degree to which tradition is permitted to continue. In other words, the presumptive teleological inevitability of modernity will change in content only during the proceeding centuries, while its spirit will remain the same.[v] For Del Noce (2014), the two ways that modernity can be broadly represented in the 20th Century are through the lens of Romanticism, and the Enlightenment (p. 288). While the first half of the century represented Romanticism in the way that it reflected a commitment to the preservation of tradition in new forms, the second half of the Century marked an intensification of the embrace of Enlightenment ideals. During the second half of the Century, the attempt to preserve the old in the new was replaced by its complete renunciation (ibid.). This turn away from a consideration of what might be worth preserving in tradition including the rapid replacement of religion with an atheistic outlook on everyday life.

Much of these developments during the second half of the Century, Del Noce (2014) notes, were a response to the appearance of various forms of Fascisms and totalitarianisms during the 30's and 40's that were understood to be 'reactionary' in nature (p. 288). By categorizing these movements as 'reactionary', the Enlightenment became the natural foil to these movements. Scientific and technological advancement and the joint repudiation of religion and embrace of atheism in the name of reason was posited as the best defense against the 'fear of transcendence,' the 'backward' turn toward

the past, and the inability to recognize the essence of human nature as a continual push to go beyond. Controlling or restraining this essence in any form was often portrayed as an affront to human nature. Subsequently, fidelity to the past and tradition became bound to a range of 'moral vices' including envy and resentment that were then broadly connected to socio-political themes such as oppression and violence (Del Noce, 2014, p. 288). For Del Noce, when such moral vices enter the political sphere they are believed to produce "…totalitarian phenomena," and "viewed as pathological attempts to bring back forms from a distant past, charged with a different meaning because they are used against the modern conquest of freedom and openness to progress" (p. 289). Ultimately, for Del Noce, post-WWII philosophy is essentially an attempt to rid the sphere of politics and ethics of any residues of romantic attachment to the past and tradition, as well as any trans-historical significance.

Del Noce (2014) points out, when speaking of the 1980's, that, '...the most novel feature of today's situation is precisely this: in the past, the appearance of a new ideal would push existing ideals into a crisis discriminating among them, saving some, rejecting others. Today, the point of departure is total negation, and this new ideal remains undetermined precisely because the negation is total' (p. 36). Contemporary gnosticsm allows only one value, and that value is the abrogation of all limits, including those of ethics. The question now become how pervasive this gnostic commitment to limitlessness actually is; where it originated from; and to what extent it has had an impact on the way that ethics in education is formulated and practiced today.

The New Totalitarianism

To embrace limitlessness is to place oneself within the ideological scope of what today, is commonly referred to as progressivism. As a particular ideology, progressivism is the product of the internalization of the conception of history as the movement along a path of historical inner-worldly transcendence. In other words, the progressive orientation is that which believes in humanity's fundamental capacity, and even obligation to transcend earthy limits in the process of improving a fallen world. For Del Noce (2014; 2017), it is precisely the focus on inner-worldly transcendence that places the emergence of progressivism within the history of Marxism. What is most important in Del Noce's argument regarding progressivism however is not necessarily its relationship to Marxism, but rather the way that its ubiquity as a social, cultural, and economic norm is a 'new totalitarianism'.[vi]

For Del Noce (2014; 2017) the merger of progressivism and Marxism happened during a time when the messianism of Marxism, and the corresponding inevitability of the 'beginning of history' that was promised in the revolutionary politics of the 20th century became untenable. No longer could

Marx's materialist conception of history maintain its legitimacy in the face of the realities of Marxist inspired revolutionary movements around the world which simply didn't coincide with the prophetic-like arguments regarding the eradication of class and the unleashing of the productive capacities of societies. In the 20th Century, Marxism took root specifically in those places where the apocalyptic vision of revolution and the corresponding emergence of a new world was understood as a form of deliverance. Berdyaev (1960) argues that this was exactly the case in early 20th Century Russian where Marxism was able to find a home because it offered up 'a doctrine of deliverance tied to the messianic vocation of the proletariat' and the creation of a 'perfect society' (p. 132, as cited in Del Noce 2014, p.90). This possibility of this new world was aligned with the ethical and theological traditions that existed in the country prior to Marxism's arrival as an ideological force. As the Russian revolution, and other Marxist-inspired revolutionary movements failed to deliver on their promises of a new world, the messianism of historical materialism was slowly exchanged for the atheism of the Enlightenment that allowed 'revolutionary' politics to shed its apocalyptic vision and instead simply adopt a new, secularized form of sociologism. Put differently, instead of the 'divinely' inspired violence of the proletarian revolution, a new 'scientism' emerged that promised similarly radical change inspired by 'scientifically' promoted forms of social engineering.

By disposing of the religious dimension of revolution, the Marxist promise of social upheaval was able to merge with the secular and scientific outlook of the Enlightenment that offered up even more radical critiques of tradition, authority, religion, and metaphysics (Del Noce, 2014, p. 209). In other words, the idea of revolutionary deliverance became untethered from tradition by way of its merger with the scientism of the Enlightenment.

In both cases, Marxism and the Enlightenment are attempts to deny the supposed limitations of humanity and place them on a temporal continuum that promises the birth of 'new man.'[vii] However, while Marxism offered up a temporally dramatic, apocalyptic vision of change (see the concept of 'Augenblick' in George Lukacs [2002] or 'divine violence' in Walter Benjamin [1986]) the new scientism of the Enlightenment conceived of change in a no-less radical way, but was set to take place over a longer duration of time. In this new, post-revolutionary context, transcendence becomes horizontalized and nothing from the past (e.g. theological or cultural traditions) is deemed worthy of preservation.

The merging of Marxism together with progressive-Enlightenment ideals is recognized as less a triumph of revolutionary politics in finding a home in multiple, new spheres of the modern world, than it is the triumph of the bourgeois spirit over the revolution. For Del Noce (2014),

'...the Marxist revolution has been the precondition that allowed the

moral features [of the bourgeois spirit] to come to the surface, while

removing the circumstances that could bring about the revolutionary

apocalypse. ...Marxism, instead of defeating the bourgeois spirit,

enabled it to take a step further: viewed in the context of world history,

it seems to have been the precondition that allowed the fundamental

break with ... traditional civilizations" (p. 210).

Del Noce makes clear that progressivism is nothing other than the triumph of the bourgeoisie that was able to purge Marxist-Communism of its biblical archetypes (e.g. the proletariat) and all reliance on past tradition while appropriating its destructive energies in the pursuit of a more unabashed libertinism.[viii]

Most striking in Del Noce's (2014) analysis is his argument that the elevation of 'scientism' to its new perch of irreproachability is a tell-tale sign of the emergence of a new totalitarianism in the way that it negates the universality of reason by granting rationality to only one side of a political discourse. Similar to previous totalitarianisms such as Communism and Nazism that politicize rationality in the name of the unfolding of history, understood respectively as a battle of opposing classes (the proletariat and bourgeoisie) and opposing races (the Aryan and the Jew), the new totalitarianism is conceived of as the historical overcoming of religion by science (Lancellotti, 2017, p. 325). By claiming that their adversaries lack the ability to conceive of the world rationally, these examples of totalitarianism are able to exclude *a priori* all criticism while simultaneously pathologizing the behaviour of their opponents. The sexual revolution is one of the most glaring examples of this process, during which time those who warned against the removal of barriers to sexual experimentation were ascribed a number of psychological illnesses.[ix] Those caught up in attempting to stop or slow the boundless energy of progressivism that this periodization of history entailed, were labelled as irrational precisely because their own metaphysical suppositions (mostly ahistorical in essence) were relegated to the status of myth.

It is worth emphasizing that what has slowly been eliminated through the rise of 'scientism' is not religion itself, but rather *the religious dimension* understood as "the natural human attitude to perceive and desire the divine" (ibid., p. 326). For Del Noce, the elimination of the religious dimension was accomplished by emptying religion of any intellectual significance whereby questions of faith were declared meaningless and subsequently reduced to the realm of feelings (ibid. p.325). As religion ceases to exist as a source for contact with the divine, it becomes identified with the therapeutic. In other words, it becomes similar to a drug, separated from metaphysical reason, and thus emptied of any significance as it relates to the creation of a good and just world.

With an intellectual clearing devoid of an engagement with the divine and metaphysical pursuits, the human sciences attained a new prestige that allowed them to achieve an increasing impact on our everyday lives. However the increased presence of the human sciences in various aspects of our everyday lives (e.g. in pedagogy, family, law, etc.) was not the product of the application of the universality of reason, but rather its politicization that corresponded with the progressive unfolding of history and the repudiation of all limits. As a result, the uniqueness of the new totalitarianism should be understood less as a force of domination (in terms of class based and racialized totalitarianisms of the 20th Century), and more as a force of disintegration that works to undermine every form of tradition and rootedness.

Similarly, as a disintegrating force, the advent of progressivism has had an enormous impact on how our conception of the good is commonly formulated-including the way that ethical conduct is conceptualized within the context of institutions of higher education. The prospect of orienting oneself toward a set of normative values has been replaced by a focus on well-being and the related notion of 'being yourself.' With no shared idea of what constitutes the good, the only possible common 'moral' goal shared by all is the expansion of particularistic forms of expression and well-being that is achieved through the removal of all forms of 'repression.' By advocating for the removal of repression, all claims of objective, universal truth and moral certitude that might constrain this pursuit are dismissed (ibid. p. 326)**.** In other words, under the weight of progressivism, the normative order of values has collapsed. For Del Noce (2017) this collapse leaves us with a conception of human activity judged to the degree that it serves as 'vitalizing tools' in the pursuit of well-being (p. 167).

With the elimination of the religious dimension and radical historicization of any kind of moral ground, ethics in academia are subsumed by politics. The result is that permanent values that could be applicable to all students, faculty and administrators alike are repudiated and the pursuit of truth and the good becomes commensurable with power. Just as all values in Marxist ideology are evaluated in terms of their relation to the goals of the revolution, contemporary acts are judged solely in terms of their contribution to limitlessness and well-being. [x] In other words, acts that are considered morally upstanding in the academy are tolerated to the extent that they advance the fundamental prerequisites of progressive ideology.

Even when absolute values such as 'social justice' and 'equity' are promoted in universities, they are ultimately limited in function and scope. While implicitly posited as transcendental, these concepts can only be mobilized by those specific individuals/groups who are most effectively able to politicize them in their favour. When conceptualized within the context of the secular sphere of

progressivism, such concepts become completely dependent on the ability to wield the power to make them operational thus eliminating their universal applicability. [xi]

Similarly, there are few absolute values promoted at universities. With the elimination of the religious dimension and the understanding of faith as a legitimate form of knowledge, genuinely transcendental concepts such as the holy and the divine are dismissed as illegitimate and excluded from any formulation of ethics.

It becomes easy to justify misconduct when one's actions are set against the supposed limits and barriers of values that are presumed to inhibit the well-being, advancement, or achievement of specific individuals or groups. Institutions of higher education now find themselves in a difficult situation where only a radical reconstitution of ethics disconnected from both politics and the therapeutic domain might allow for the mitigation of the kinds of misconduct found throughout the academy today.

Rosminian Ethics

There are two possible approaches to effectively curtailing the effects of contemporary gnosticism (ie progressive ideology) on the conception of ethics prevalent in universities today. The first approach would be to work within the context of higher education as it currently exists, believing that as 'primary institutions'[xii], these universities and colleges have enough autonomy to allow for the establishment of a new approach to ethics that might not appear uniformly across academia but may be able to procure an influential role in specific sites. The second approach would be to start from scratch and create new institutions of higher education from the ground up with an approach to teaching, learning, and research, along with a corresponding organizational structure that reflects a completely different ethical framework. This approach would be justified if the pervasiveness of the politicization of ethics and/or the prioritization of the therapeutic in universities were understood to be too pervasive to overcome.

In either case, what is certain is that a radical new approach to ethics is needed in order to surmount both the politicization and personalization of reason that serve as the sine qua non of the ethical relativism of our time. In order to begin to allow the university to create the conditions to improve the conduct of students and staff, as well as the administrative and managerial foundation of higher education, the establishment of a transcendental ethical framework and normative order of values is essential. This is not to say, however, that transcendental frames of reference do not also include their own potential dilemmas including the reification of creativity and the radical historicization of values.[xiii]

It is with these potential problems in mind that the work of 19th Century philosopher Antonio Rosmini becomes indispensable. Rosmini's ethics not only provide us with a way to delineate between ethics and the personalization of reason thereby extracting ethics from its current connection to well-being and the therapeutic, but also provide us with a way to identify how we might cultivate a fidelity to the universal good. Put differently, Rosminian ethics allow us to envision a normative order of values that are detached from any relation to eudemonology (i.e. the science of happiness). Although this article is not the place for a full elaboration of Rosminian ethics, in the space remaining in this section I intend to present a summary of his ethics in offering up a possible way to eliminate some of the misconduct currently plaguing higher education.

For Rosmini (1988), ethics is the 'science that gives systematic order to the norms that human actions must adjust themselves, and determines the relation between actions and norms' (p. 216). Ethics are important for Rosmini, because they provide a foundation for action. As such, ethics are indispensable to morality in that they function as a science in formulating maxims to help guide our actions. The distinguishable characteristic of Rosmini's (1988) ethics, however, is the way that he posits the idea of *being* as the basis from which we judge all that is good in general. In other words, the idea of *being* is the first principle from which all forms of reasoning arise. As such, the idea of *being* acts as a 'light', emerging from outside of the mind that allows us to perceive the universality of being.

For Rosmini, not only does the idea of *being* serve as the original fundament of thought and reason-without which both thought and knowledge are impossible- but also that which pertains to the realm of objectivity. The idea of being is not a mental construction, but rather a reference to our natural access to a real order. Consequently, as the foundational source of discernment, the idea of being also serves as the source from which we can orient ourselves toward an objective approach to moral conduct. Ultimately, for Rosmini (1988), the principle of ethics is not internal to the representations of the mind, but that which is provided to us by way of nature and then intuited through the light of reason.^{xiv}

If the idea of *being* is the origin of judgment and discernment, the question then becomes how we can use this ontological illumination as a basis from which to identify objective moral good. The difficulty in answering this question is related to the corresponding difficulty that comes with prioritizing the ontological sphere in ethics, and the identification of what comprises good in general. Such an undertaking is difficult precisely because ontology does not solely pertain to the field of ethics but also to the field of eudemonology that has happiness and well-being as its object of study. Subsequently, in order to begin to outline an objective approach to identifying moral good, ethics must be clearly separated from eudemonology. In other words, ethics must eliminate any subjective

elements focused on the relative good in order to begin to approach a universal conception of good. For Rosmini (ibid.), subjective good is that which pertains to the sphere of sensation (i.e. what is felt), while objective good is that which is contemplated, intuited by way of the light of reason. Moreover, subjective good is a reference to the good relative to the person who is enjoying it, while objective good is the good related to all and expressive of the universality of being.

As that which both precedes and is antithetical to sensation, the idea of being is related neither to opinion nor to desire. Consequently, being is the site from which objective good can emerge while serving as a foundation of all of our actions and judgments. Rosmini (1998) states, '(B)eing and good do not differ in reality. Everything which has some degree of existence is also good to that degree' (p.39). While subjective good is primarily confined to the corporeal domain and visceral experience, objective good is that which is identified through reason. Moreover, the act of understanding is universal in that everyone possesses the ability to mentally conceive of good. When the good that is conceived of through the intellect passes to the act, the good becomes absolute. For Rosmini (ibid.), it is through acting on the concept of good derived by the 'light of reason' that we are able to achieve the absolute good (p.52). The 'light of reason' is not the same as reason itself, and therefore different than the reason contained within the 'scientism' previously mentioned and that filled Del Noce with such enmity. While reason can be used to deny or alter being, or to deny what is perceived, the light of reason cannot error because it is not dependent on human beings. In other words, the light of reason emerges directly form the idea of being in which all things that exist demonstrate the way that we should act toward them. While our reflections, disconnected from fidelity to the idea of being, can give way to error, the light of reason is infallible.

It is also at this point that the objective good that we identify can also become a moral good. Knowledge of the good has no moral connotations but becomes moral at the point at which one wills the objective good through an act. That is to say, that morality is not an idea, but rather an act that exists in accordance with a conception of good derived through the light of reason. The morality of each person corresponds to the degree to which one is able to use the light of reason to reach a greater proximity to what Rosmini refers to as one's ideal being or the absolute.

Ultimately, for Rosmini (1988), '(E)thics is concerned with duty and obligation toward an object by the intelligence, not with pleasure and self-interest which in the last analysis always regard the subject' (p. 52). Instead, 'a morally good subject loves good for its own sake, in its proper nature as good, as intelligence shows it to him' (ibid. p. 53). Here we see an ethics based not on happiness, nor the pleasures brought with the embrace of the new 'freedoms,' but rather through fidelity to the objective order of being provided by the light of reason.

In his own writing on Rosmini, Del Noce (2017) summarises the stakes in identifying the principles of ethics in objective terms when he argues that Rosmini 'sets his thesis in contrast with those who, by identifying the moral law (in itself an object) with the subject, end up attributing to the subject the divine characteristics (eternity, necessity, universality) of the supreme moral law, thereby making man a law to himself' (p. 173). Once human beings become a law unto themselves, establishing a guiding inter-generational normative order of values becomes impossible. By identifying the idea of being as the basis of judgement, human beings cease to be autonomous, and instead are forced to recognise their own heteronomy. Unlike the progressive ethics that dominate the academy today, humans' heteronomous nature not only compels us to admit to the existence of the transcendental but also to the limits of being.

Ultimately, Rosmini provides us with three fundamental differences to the way that ethics is currently constituted in higher education. First, he provides an ahistorical, transcendental criterion for evaluating what is good and moral. Secondly, he provides us with a clear way to distinguish between a conception of the good derived in accordance with the idea of being, with that of contemporary gnosticism (i.e. progressive ideology) that is specifically aligned against it. And thirdly, because the good is conceived of as a product of one's relationship to the idea of being disconnected from the relativity of happiness, Rosmini detaches ethics from the satisfaction of personal desires or impulses, well-being, or the compulsion to 'be oneself', and instead provides us a pathway toward recognition of a universal conception of the good.

Conclusion

Contemporary gnosticism in the form of progressive ideology has become ubiquitous in institutions of higher education today. Its place in the academy is almost beyond reproach as any doubt to its legitimacy is frequently prevented from seeing the light of day. While, in one sense, progressivism has weakened (not eliminated) ethics by rejecting the possibility of its universal or trans-historical relevance for the academy, in another sense it has reassigned the act of moral discernment to the spheres of vitality, happiness, or politics. As a revolt against being, progressivism has replaced a focus on the transcendental as a framework for just and moral acts, with a focus on feelings, becomings, and individualized fulfilment. It is precisely because these personalized stand-ins for the transcendental do not carry any universal significance that ethical conduct takes on a new form. In this new form, ethics ceases to operate as an end in itself and instead becomes a pure tool directed toward one's success. Subsequently, discriminating between moral and non-moral acts in educational contexts can become ancillary to the primary concern of well-being. In other words, the ends are more easily

justified when they contribute to students', faculty, and administrators' forms of self-realization and individualized advancement.

In contemporary higher education, ethics are conceived of as mere tools for one's own development. Cheating and plagiarism, fraudulent research, and administrative corruption become easily justified as a means to attain personal advancement and success because any normative system of values is typically understood as a hindrance and source of repression to be overcome. Academic integrity and the pursuit of the truth becomes both irrelevant and impossible. As all ethical frameworks become socially and historically contingent, the institutional sphere becomes a home for the unfolding of personal politics instead of an educational site oriented toward the promotion of what is universally good or true.

The challenge for universities today is to develop a conception of ethics disengaged from the political or the therapeutic. While the difficulty in this is self-evident in that it requires an institutional reorientation away from the pervasiveness of progressive ideology and the limitlessness that it promotes, the semi-autonomous nature of institutions of higher education might allow the possibility to consider alternative approaches to ethics. If a new approach is to emerge however, the first place to look will not be in the form of new managerial, administrative, or pedagogical strategies, but rather in the establishment of a philosophical orientation that understands the connection that exist between being and ethics. Instead of understanding our ontology as something to be altered or denied, we might do well to consider how an ethical framework within academia directed toward the fidelity to being could help align institutions of higher education with a trans-historical, universal conception of the good.

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[i]   See Eugene Webb (1981).

[ii]   For Voegelin, the ideologies which relied on a chosen elite to implement a foundational change to humanity included both Nietzsche's *ubermensch* and Marx's proletariat. Although his use of the concept of gnosticism to explain modernity has been widely criticized as being too broad and lacking specificity (see for example Del Noce 2014; Ward 2005; Franz 1992), his use of the term to describe particular aspects of revolutionary movements of the past has remained useful for helping us consider the way that the history of religion is related to global political trends.

[iii]   While a purely economic rendering of Marxism has little to do with eschatological aspects of Christianity, humanist Marxism simply sublated it. This was exactly the process by which Marx (1998), through an engagement with the work of Ludwig Feuerbach, was able to develop his materialist philosophical orientation that posited that human beings could overcome their own self-alienation (caused by religious belief) by redirecting their focus on the transcendental to the material realm of earth.

[iv]   This is also where Del Noce's departs from Voegelin and his concept of gnosticism. While Voegelin utilized the concept to refer to any and all revolutionary movements, Del Noce believed that the post-WWII era required that the term 'revolution' be replaced with 'modernity.'

[v]   See Marshall Berman (1982).

[vi]   The discussion of progressivism as totalitarianism in nature challenges former analyses and studies that have argued that totalitarianism is always the product of backward, religious and reactionary forces.

[vii]   The creation of a 'new man' can only be the product of Marx's *Gattungswesen* or generic ontology of humanity or the endless becoming of progressivism.

[viii]   Interestingly, the transformation of failed revolutionary movements from a socio-economic to a libertinism focus has happened multiple times through history where the end-result is an embrace of atheism. The examples that Del Noce (2014, p. 207) provides are Bruno's revolution at the culmination of the Renaissance, Jacobins at the end of the Enlightenment, and the Marxists of the 1960's. In each context, atheism and varying forms of libertinism were the final orientations of these attempts at revolutionary change.

[ix]   A prime example of this is found in the work of Wilhelm Reich (1945;1946) who viewed both the nuclear family and traditional morality that limits sexual gratification as the basis of the emergence of fascist authoritarianism.

[x]   This is particularly evident in the way that Marx's non-philosophy has replaced ethical consideration and the contemplation of the good with political action whose means are judged solely in terms of the way they help advance pre-established political goals. Marx's understanding of morality reached its clearest articulation in Lenin (1966) who famously argued that '(M)orality is whatever serves the success of the proletarian revolution' (cited in Del Noce, 2014, p.65).

[xi]   What may be surprising for some, is that the original formulation of the concept of 'social justice' was not a product of progressive ideology, but rather the Thomist inspired philosophy of Catholic priests and scholars Antonio Rosmini and Luigi Taparelli de'Azeglio in the 1840's (Kraynack, 2018). It is Rosmini who utilized the term *la guizticia sociale* in prioritizing the 'public good' over 'the private citizen' or the interests of specific parties, classes, and individuals because justice is inherently connected to the creation of social cohesion and bonds (ibid. p.6). Furthermore, it is Rosmini who also argues that the social cohesion enacted through the prioritization of the 'public good' is not achievable merely through the acts of human beings or the state, but only through acting in accordance with the 'Providence of God' (ibid.).

[xii]   Baker (2014) and Buford (1999) argue that universities are 'primary institutions' in that they not only exists as relateively stable forms of social relations serving specific social needs in a community, but also as sites that have a significant impact on the overall ideological, spiritual, and ethical orientation of those who live and work in other spheres of everyday life. Put differently, to grant universities the title of 'primary institutions' would mean that in spite of increasing forms of internal audits, marketization, and incorporation into the global economy, universities do continue to have a degree of autonomy.

[xiii]   Although Kant would seem to be the point of departure here, it is arguable whether or not his transcendental ethics is capable of avoiding either a relation to eudemonology (i.e. the science of happiness) or subjectivism (see Bruno 1916; Franck, 2006; Del Noce, 2017).

[xiv]   Rosmini's reliance on an idea that comes from outside of the human mind as an illuminating presence, places him in a unique philosophical position. For Cleary (2015), the uniqueness of Rosmini is identifiable in the way that his conception of ethics is opposed to both idealists in the way that it 'reduces the formal requirements of thought to the intuition of being' and also sensationalists in the way that it 'maintains the per se inadequacy of the senses to provide more than the matter of thought.'