

Note from the Book Review Editor:

Normally the Canadian Journal of Higher Education publishes three to four book reviews at the end of each issue. In this issue we are pleased to include a philosophical review essay that considers a topic pertinent to higher education. The regular format of book reviews will return in the next issue. --ASM

Review Essay / Comptes rendus

Mackler, Stephanie (2009). *Learning for Meaning's Sake: Toward the Hermeneutic University*. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers. Pages: 124. Price: 49.00 USD (paper).

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The Crisis of the University

Stephanie Mackler's book *Learning for Meaning's Sake* begins with the observation that "the contemporary American university has in recent decades found itself in the midst of an identity crisis" (p. xviii), and it poses as the central question leading from this: "What is the university for?" (p. xix). Mackler cites several other texts that have addressed the "crisis of the university" in the United States, including Derek Bok's (2003) *Universities in the Marketplace* and Bruce Wilshire's (1990) *The Moral Collapse of the University*. In Canada, a similar crisis has been diagnosed in the university, as is illustrated by works such as William Neilson and Chad Gaffield's (1986) edited volume *The University in Crisis: A Medieval Institution in the Twenty-First Century*, and Paul Axelrod's (2002) *Values in Conflict: The University, the Marketplace, and the Trials of Liberal Education*.

Leaving aside, for the moment, the differences between the U.S. and Canadian higher education systems and the particular foci of the various authors, what the texts have in common is a critique of the domination of (especially applied) sciences and technology, the influence of the market model, and the decline of the humanities. These pervasive and, it appears, unstoppable trends have led Canadian writer Margaret Atwood, in her speculative fiction works *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and *The Year of the Flood* (2009), to paint a future society in which the differences between the well-funded and reputable "Watson-Crick Institute" (named after James Watson and Francis Crick, the discoverers of DNA) and the underfunded and second-choice "Martha Graham Academy" (named

after dancer and choreographer Martha Graham) are even starker than the differences between the relative positions of the sciences and humanities today. I think Atwood's dystopic warning is timely, and I agree with Mackler that the lack of appreciation for the humanities because their immediate economic benefit isn't clear, is shortsighted. "Knowledge, disconnected and commodified ... no longer helps us to make sense of life outside the narrow sphere of technical and economic rationality" (p. 9).

One of the differences between the Canadian and U.S. higher education system, and an important focus of Mackler's book, is the history of liberal arts colleges in the U.S. "What we now know as the American university grew out of the liberal arts college in the late nineteenth century" (p. 15). Mackler herself has taught at private liberal arts colleges in the United States since 2004: first at Cornell College, now at Ursinus College. Mackler even goes as far as to propose that the university should be distinguished from "what we might call research or training institutes" and that "we should reserve the name *university* or *higher learning* for those institutions that serve a higher human ideal", one that "has largely been associated with the liberal arts" (p. xxi).¹

This "higher human ideal," according to Mackler, is the ability to make meaning out of the fragmented experiences of our lives. The university's focus on knowledge in increasingly specialized areas has not helped to alleviate this experience of fragmentation. Therefore, argues Mackler, "the *liberal* part of the university should endow its disparate studies with meaning so that learning has purpose" (p. 16). To that end, Mackler addresses in detail how university students can learn to make meaning by studying how "skilled meaning makers" have gone about the task (Ch. 4) and by creating their own narratives which may, in turn, serve others who want to study meaning-making (Ch. 5). Mackler is a gifted writer, and has, on the whole, succeeded in presenting her ideas in language that is accessible to a wider audience interested in the future of the university, without succumbing to simplicity. Her answer to the questions of purpose and future of the university is worth reading and comparing with other answers that have been given to these questions. The focus of the remainder of this essay review will be my disagreement with the particular answer provided in the book, *viz.* that meaning making and the education of meaning-makers should be the primary goal of the university. In order not to succumb to Mackler's criticism that "we have become much better at saying what we are against than stating what we are for" (p. 12), I will also propose an alternative answer.

A Crisis of Meaning?

The core argument of *Learning for Meaning's Sake* is that many people in the Western world experience a loss of meaning in their lives, that they are yearning for meaning, and that the university has a role to play in helping them become better meaning-makers: "The purpose of this book is to redefine the university as a place of meaning-making in response to both the university's identity crisis and the crisis of meaning in Western culture" (p. 5). I certainly don't disagree with the premise that many people in the Western world seem to experience a loss of meaning in their lives, and have a desire for meaning. The flourishing industry of self-help books, websites and television shows is evidence of this desire. My disagreement is with Mackler's conclusion that universities should see it as their goal to provide meaning. Put differ-

ently: the fact that human beings desire meaning is insufficient justification for the claim that it ought to be the university's mission to fulfill that desire. There are many human endeavours that aim to fulfill our desire for meaning: the production and contemplation of works of art, and the participation in religious rituals are two prime examples. It is not the purpose of the university to create works of art and religious rituals, but rather to be a place of *study*—including the study of art and religion.

Mackler quotes Hannah Arendt's observation that "life in its sheer thereness is meaningless" (p. 4), and, from the perspective that "having meaning is a condition of human life" (p. 26), this meaninglessness is a challenge. The question is how much meaninglessness human beings can bear, and what the effects are of comforting ourselves with stories that endow the "sheer thereness" of life with meaning. It seems to me that, while a human life without any meaning-making is inconceivable, the challenge may well be to muster the courage to face the meaninglessness of life more often than we currently do. I find myself more sympathetic to Jean Baudrillard's (1995/1996) perception of not a shortage but an excess of meaning. Baudrillard agrees with Arendt that "life in its sheer thereness is meaningless," but his assessment of meaning and meaninglessness is quite different. The world, according to Baudrillard, is an unbearable illusion,

and to keep it at bay, we have to realize the world, give it force of reality, make it exist and signify at all costs, take from it its secret, arbitrary, accidental character.... We continue to manufacture meaning, even though we know there is none. It remains to be seen ... whether the illusion of meaning is a vital illusion or one that is destructive of the world and the subject itself. (pp. 16-17)

Slavoj Žižek (2009) also understands the desire for meaning: "When something horrible happens, our spontaneous tendency is to search for meaning, it must have a meaning. ... Even if we interpret a catastrophe as a punishment, it makes it easier in a way. It is not some terrifying blind force" (pp. 157-158). However, Žižek's concern—and one that I share—is that the indulgence of this desire blinds us to the fact that the "temptation of meaning" is "one of the elementary ideological mechanisms" (p. 157). The problem is not that the question of meaning is *raised*, but rather that it is *answered*, for the investment of events with an explanation of purpose and reason is a prime site for ideology. In this regard, Mackler's discussion of the work of René Arcilla, a philosopher of education at NYU, merits attention.

Like Mackler, Arcilla argues for a hermeneutic liberal education but, unlike Mackler, he emphasizes *raising* rather than answering questions. According to Arcilla, there is value in the experience of not knowing, of being left to wonder and not being able to answer why something has happened. "With this in mind," Mackler describes Arcilla's perspective, "we can still ask metaphysical questions, but we would seek answers with an awareness of the fact that our search cannot be complete" (p. 62). This, I would argue, requires precisely the kind of intellectual courage and honesty that universities should seek to foster. By contrast, Mackler emphasizes *answering* the questions:

Arcilla ... mainly reflects on questioning and appreciating moments of mystery, joy, and grace. In, on the other hand, emphasize attempts at responding

to such moments with answers. “Story-telling,” as I call it, will have arisen in aporeia², but it will differ from pure wonderment. Whereas Arcilla talks about what it is like to get lost, I am also interested in the process of finding one’s way again. (p. 65)

While I understand the desire for the consolation that meaning provides, I would argue that the university should focus on fostering the intellectual courage and honesty to say “I don’t know” when we don’t, and on cultivating vigilance against the ideological and possibly destructive uses of stories that provide meaning.

Martha Nussbaum’s (2010) recent book *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* offers another perspective on the “crisis of the university” and the university’s purposes. Nussbaum shares Mackler’s commitment to the humanities, and underscores the value of liberal arts colleges and courses. However, she sees their value first and foremost in their contribution to a healthy democracy at the national level, and to combating injustice at the international level. While she acknowledges that the humanities enhance people’s ability to make meaning, this is not, according to Nussbaum, the primary reason universities should value them more:

Education is not just for citizenship. It prepares people for employment and, importantly, for meaningful lives. ... All modern democracies, however, are societies in which the meaning and ultimate goals of human life are topics of reasonable disagreement among citizens who hold many different religious and secular views, and these citizens will naturally differ about how far various types of humanistic education serve their particular goals. What we can agree about is that young people all over the world, in any nation lucky enough to be democratic, need to grow up to be participants in a form of government in which the people inform themselves about crucial issues they will address as voters and, sometimes, as elected or appointed officials. (p. 9)

In other words, if a university education helps young people live lives they experience as meaningful, that is wonderful, but as a social institution the university’s primary responsibility is to the flourishing of democracy.

Drawing on the work of Hannah Arendt, Mackler argues that universities should foster natality, in the sense of “a disposition to attend to questions of meaning” (p. 25), and combat banality, in the sense of “a disposition to rely unthinkingly on pre-given interpretations” (p. 26). Although, as Mackler explains, we all need to rely on pre-given interpretations to some extent, simply to be able to function without being overwhelmed by demands for interpretation, the danger lies in becoming too reliant on common sense and stock explanations and losing our sensitivity to situations that demand new interpretations. Nussbaum agrees with that assessment but, different from Mackler, she sees these tasks as in the service of democracy rather than of personal meaning-making: “Human beings are prone to be subservient to both authority and peer pressure; to prevent atrocities we need to counteract these tendencies, producing a culture of individual dissent” (Nussbaum, pp. 53-54). I heartily endorse Mackler’s call for universities that foster *thinking*, and not just *knowledge production*—and that understand the difference between the two—but I appreciate Nussbaum’s emphasis on the *ethico-political* necessity of thinking.

Mackler's argument for meaning and the cultivation of meaning-makers is based on a particular conception of ethics, and idea of what a life well-lived looks like: "There is an ethical dimension of meaning insofar as the way we understand determines both our own flourishing as individuals and how we relate to others" (p. 4). But while the ethical aspects of meaning-making are mentioned throughout the book, the conception of ethics that undergirds Mackler's argument is one that leaves the self quite securely at the centre. Mackler makes use of Ricoeur's early work on interpretation—and, as I will discuss in the next section, his critique of the "hermeneutics of suspicion"—but she does not make use of the conception of ethics Ricoeur (1990/1992) outlines in his later work: "Let us define 'ethical intention' as *aiming at the 'good life' with and for others, in just institutions*" (p. 172, italics in original). My concern is that Mackler is too focused on "the good life with others" and that the other aspects of Ricoeur's definition, "for others" and "just institutions," are underemphasized.

In Nussbaum's argument in *Not for Profit*, the emphasis is on the contributions that university education should make to democracy and political justice: to developing a deeper understanding of the implications of our actions on the lives of others, and to overcoming inequalities, both within one's own country as well as on a global scale. Mackler's hermeneutic perspective would also have allowed her to focus more on the significance of meaning-making for democracy and justice. As Gert Biesta (2010a) explains, Arendt's views on meaning-making and natality underscore not just that, as Mackler puts it, "the way we understand ... determines how we relate to others," but that the way we understand is *dependent* on others:

Our freedom is fundamentally interconnected with the freedom of others; it is *contingent upon* the freedom of others. The latter is not to be understood as just an empirical fact, but rather as the normative core of Arendt's philosophy. Arendt is committed to a world in which everyone has the opportunity to act, appear, and be free. (p. 561, emphasis added)

To understand that the self is dependent on the other, and that we are therefore responsible not just for living well *with* but, indeed, *for* others, is a significant shift in ethical perspective. Living well *for others* is a more demanding conception of ethical responsibility, one that decenters the self and places the other at the center of concerns about the good life. To elaborate this aspect of his ethics, Ricoeur (1990/1992) turns to the work of Emmanuel Levinas. In the final section of this review, I will turn to another thinker whose ethics is indebted to Levinas's work: Jacques Derrida. In this section I will propose an alternative view of the purpose of the university as focused not on meaning-making but on responsibility for the other.

Toward the Radically Hermeneutic University

Mackler dismisses the "hermeneutics of suspicion" based on accounts of Paul Ricoeur and C. John Sommerville. She characterizes the "hermeneutics of suspicion" as a "hypercritical attitude" with which texts and ideas are examined

in order to prove them wrong—to criticize, deconstruct, and unmask—rather than to learn, or, in [Ricoeur's] words, 'retrieve' something from them. It might be possible to argue that we can learn or retrieve something through critical-

ity. However, the intent to destroy does not carry with it the possibility for creation. Although something new might arise after destruction, destruction itself does not aim toward anything but negation of what is. In this way, my implicit assumption is that recovery and learning involve a positive search for something new and cannot coexist with a motion to destroy. (p. 11)

Unfortunately, Mackler does not consider any work by the allegedly “suspicious” hermeneuticists themselves. I don’t know who these hypercritical scholars, bent on destruction, are but, given her use of the term “deconstruction,” both in the quotation above and in a later section on the hermeneutics of suspicion (p. 69), I will venture the guess that one of the culprits Mackler has in mind is Jacques Derrida.

Had Mackler considered the work of Derrida, I believe she could not have reached the conclusions that she has. The idea that deconstruction is about destruction is a persistent misunderstanding. Derrida has insisted repeatedly that deconstruction is affirmative, both in the sense that it affirms the structure-under-deconstruction, and in the sense that it affirms that which was occluded and excluded by this structure. In other words, deconstructive critique is not a “hypercritical” or “destructive” critique for the sake of critique but rather a critique that involves a close attention to and respect for that which it critiques, and that is carried out for the sake of justice. Regarding the first point, Derrida (2002) notes—and his body of work illustrates—that “deconstruction presupposes the most intensely cultivated, literate relation to the tradition” (p. 15). And elsewhere, also trying to dispel the destructive reputation of deconstruction, Derrida (1982/1985) writes, “the texts I want to read from the deconstructive point of view are texts which I love, with that impulse of identification which is indispensable for reading. They are texts whose future, I think, will not be exhausted for a long time” (p. 87). Regarding the second point, John Caputo writes that “deconstruction is respect, respect for the other, a respectful, responsible affirmation of the other, a way if not to efface at least to delimit the narcissism of the self ... and to make some space to let the other be” (Derrida & Caputo, 1997, p. 44). And Derrida (1990/2002) even goes as far as to call deconstruction itself justice: “*Deconstruction is justice*” (p. 243, italics in original). Deconstruction is justice because it is witnessed as a responsibility, to see what the structures that make thought possible, make *impossible* at the same time.³

Derrida (1990/2004) argues that the “minimal responsibility” of those “belonging” to the university today is to question the university itself, which “is not merely a few walls or some outer structures surrounding, protecting, guaranteeing or restricting the freedom of our work; it is also and already *the structure of our interpretation*” (p. 102, italics added). In other words, Derrida calls not for more interpretation, or more room for interpretive activity, but for vigilance about the structures that *condition* our interpretation. Such structures include, among others, disciplinary boundaries, knowledge criteria, and the distinction between pure and applied science; all of these both enable and constrain the thinking that can take place at the university today, and society at large insofar as it is affected by the thinking that takes place at the university. The responsibility to think deconstructively about the university also involves a responsibility to think deconstructively about the *humanities*, that part of university work and discourse that has been the privileged place for thinking about interpretation and critique. For that reason, Derrida (2001/2002) calls for “Humanities capable of taking on the tasks of deconstruction, beginning with the deconstruction of their own history

and their own axioms” (p. 204). One of the central features of the history and axioms of the humanities has been their imbrication with the concept of the *human*, so the responsible humanities, humanities capable of deconstructive self-critique,

would treat the history of man, the idea, the figure, and the notion of “what is proper to man.” They will do this on the basis of a nonfinite series of oppositions by which man is determined, in particular the traditional opposition of the life form called “human” and of the life form called “animal.” (p. 231)

This illustrates how, from a shared commitment to the humanities, an emphasis on the purpose of the university as responsibility for what *conditions* our meaning-making rather than on meaning-making itself, leads us to different questions, and a different vision of the ethical role of the university and the humanities today, from the ones Mackler proposes. I will return later to the specific question of the place of the non-human in the humanities.

Because of the emphasis on the scrutiny of the structure of interpretation itself, Caputo (2000) has called Derrida’s approach a “more radical hermeneutics,” which he describes as a hermeneutics motivated by the “passion of non-knowing” (p. 3) and the “inescapability of interpretation” (p. 6). It is a radically agnostic hermeneutics that requires the courage and honesty I mentioned before, of saying “I don’t know” when we don’t. This radical hermeneutic or deconstructive perspective is concerned not with the personal suffering we incur when we find ourselves unable to answer questions of meaning in our lives, but with the suffering we inflict on *others* whenever we believe we have found an answer but have not yet examined whom or what our answer occludes and excludes.

In addition to the responsibility to question the structure of our interpretation, Derrida argues that we have to think carefully about responsibility, how it differs from accountability, and what or whom the university is responsible for:

How is one to feel *accountable* for what one does not have, and is not yet? But what else is one to feel *responsible* for, if not for what does not belong to us? For what, like the future, belongs and comes down to the other? (p. 155)

Responsibility, if it is to escape a simple question of rule and law, is about the unforeseeable otherness that may not be able to find a place in existing structures. This emphasis on justice and the other is also present in the work of Jean-François Lyotard on the *differend*, to which Mackler refers in her argument:

A differend occurs when we are unable to find the words to explain something. ... When we do not know how to express what is happening and stumble to find the right way to speak, we experience what Lyotard calls a “differend.” ... The inability to describe an experience in language becomes significant for us in an existential way. According to Lyotard, we experience it as a suffering ... We feel compelled to respond in language to a differend but are pained by our initial inability to do so. (pp. 37-38)

Mackler gives the impression that a differend is a moment of *suffering* for the self when it cannot find the right language to express an experience. On my reading,

however, Lyotard's (1983/1988) discussion of the differend focuses on the differend as an *injustice*, and on the responsibility of helping to overcome it.⁴ As I have discussed elsewhere (Ruitenbergh, 2009), a differend is a particular type of dispute or disagreement. Distinct from the type of dispute Lyotard calls litigation, in which a plaintiff has suffered damage, in a *differend* a victim has suffered a wrong:

This is what a wrong [*tort*] would be: a damage [*dommage*] accompanied by the loss of the means to prove the damage. This is the case if the victim is deprived of life, or of all his or her liberties, or of the freedom to make his or her ideas or opinions public, or simply of the right to testify to the damage, or even more simply if the testifying phrase is itself deprived of authority. (Lyotard, 1983/1988, §7, p. 5)

In litigation the two parties agree on the rules by which the dispute should be settled; in a *differend* these rules themselves are part of the injustice suffered. A *differend* can occur, for instance, when a plaintiff, in order to be heard, is forced to use the very language that causes the damages s/he wants to contest; the only language in which the case can be heard is language that undermines the credibility of the plaintiff, who, as a result, becomes a victim.

As I mentioned previously, the humanities have, in their focus on the human, assumed a boundary between the human and non-human. Lyotard (1983/1988) calls the animal "the paradigm of the victim," and explains, "the animal is deprived of the possibility of bearing witness according to the human rules for establishing damages, and as a consequence, every damage is like a wrong and turns it into a victim ipso facto" (§38, p. 28). One of the directions in which the humanities might turn their attention is to the relationship between the human and non-human, and to the responsibility of the human to the non-human world. Derrida (2001/2002) predicts "that none of these traditional concepts of 'what is proper to man' [i.e., 'humanity'] and thus of what is *opposed* to it can resist a consistent scientific and deconstructive analysis" (p. 231).

From a radical hermeneutic perspective, the role of the university, and of the humanities in particular, is thus not to enable students to become better at making meaning and alleviating the anxiety of meaninglessness in their lives, but rather to become better at questioning—and remedying—the exclusionary effects of the concepts and knowledge categories that have allowed them to make meaning in the first place. "What is at stake in literature, in a philosophy, in a politics perhaps, is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them" (Lyotard, § 22, p. 13). While I share Mackler's critique of the instrumentalism and technical rationality driving the university, I would propose that the purpose of the university that is underdeveloped is not meaning-making, but *justice*, and that learning at the university is not primarily for the sake of meaning, but for the sake of the *other*. ♣

NOTES

1. Although Mackler does not examine this, it is worth considering the similarities and differences between the view Mackler proposes and the view of the university (with the Faculty of Philosophy in a central role) proposed by Immanuel Kant (1798/1979) in *The Conflict of the Faculties*.

2. Aporeia or, as it is spelled more commonly, aporia, refers to the experience of an impasse. Derrida (1993) explains an aporia as a difficulty of passing, a “stuckness,” a place from which it is impossible to move on. Derived from the Greek aporos, impassable, it means without (a-) passage (poros).
3. As Biesta (2010b) explains, deconstruction should be understood as auto-deconstruction, as something that a structure, text, or idea undergoes rather than as something a person can inflict on it. The scholar can witness, but not carry out, deconstruction.
4. This reading is in line with James Palermo’s (2004) critique of Mackler’s (2004) essay “Natality Seduced: Lyotard and the Birth of the Improbable.” Palermo writes that “because Mackler’s attention focuses on the new, her emphasis yields a soft reading; that is, one in which the centrality of political justice becomes diffused and implicit” (p. 373).

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