

# BOOK REVIEW

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*Wilshire, Bruce. The Moral Collapse of the University: Professionalism, Purity, and Alienation. N.Y.: SUNY, 1990. 287pp.*

First, let's get comfortable. Professor Wilshire assures us that we here at Kennesaw State College are marching to no different drum from that of our peer and non-peer institutions, the research institutions (universities) or multiversities.

Across the country, he tells us, "There is a cry for change and interdisciplinary programs springing up in nearly every university; faculty committees are assembled to pick a 'core curriculum': what every educated person should know. We are caught up in transition" (xix). So that's it — just transition. But from what to what? From being humanists educating humans to professionals "obsessed with stunning numbers, words, calculations, evaluations, and performances," ultimately losing touch with the "human reality within which we live" (29).

Bruce Wilshire is a professor of philosophy at Rutgers who is fearful that the academy he loves and the profession — teaching — that he reveres are victims of the same consumerism that produces numb and detached students. As the tone of this book reflects, he is concerned, intense, moody and at the same time cozy with his readers (all disillusioned teachers no doubt; why, Wilshire might assume, would an administrator pick up a book with the words "purity" and "alienation" in the title?) He is, in due time, writing the book that tells us we should have listened more carefully to Robert Pirsig when he told us all those truths about quality and values in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. But we didn't and so here we are: worried, disillusioned, and deeply fearful that the "new university" (a

product of the seventeenth century Cartesian concept of knowledge) that was intended to "liberate us from religious dogma and open the doors of freedom and opportunity for many, many people" has instead served to separate us from ourselves. Implicit within the development of the multiversity with its goal of producing "useful knowledge" was a conception that "housed the knower within machines, within a mechanical body and world, and which tended to invalidate intimacy, freedom, and ethical responsibility. It isolated persons from themselves, others, and nature" (33).

But what does all this have to do with professionalism, purity and alienation? We are alienated from ourselves and from each other in a society that worships consumerism, that touts "academic entrepreneurship." In turn, the modern university promotes this alienation by dividing the personal level of self from the professional level. Wilshire writes:

● This is the crux. What if in all our knowing we fail to grasp ourselves? What could be more foolish? As Goethe's Faust says, 'Knowledge tricks us beyond measure.' . . . The special authority of the professor carries the special responsibility to exemplify personally what every investigator presupposes: the nature and value of meaning and truth. The ultimate educating force is who I am. (31)

So the fact that we are not a research university does not insure our safety in this "bankruptcy of the university as an educational institution" (36). We still, individually, have to deal with the ultimate educating force: who we are. Yet, because our culture holds the Cartesian view of the world, we necessarily view the world as external to us, as a machine. If we agree with Wilshire's definition of professionalism, and there is certainly no reason not to, we see our profession as a "way of life which

provides a livelihood through the practice of a skill valued by society" (48). And yet we fail to integrate our "feeling life" and our professional life. Why? These aspects of our being can't be grasped in terms of "mechanistic physics," and our society is dead set on separating us from ourselves in any way possible by insisting that we see ourselves solely through what we possess — homes, cars, ivy league degrees. Out of touch with ourselves, we no longer deeply trust our basic feelings. And here is the scary part, according to Wilshire:

● To devalue immediately lived personal life is to begin to die at the core, no matter how much power is exercised or recognition extracted from contemporaries for technical or professional skills. (46)

The alienation that characterizes the modern consciousness, or more accurately the modern unconsciousness, is further reinforced by the gods of technology and specialization. Both technology and specialization diminish each individual's feeling of responsibility for the whole. Specialization cuts workers off from the "historical and human impact of the endeavor," and hence from a "sense of individual responsibility for the larger community" (50). In short, we bow to the bureaucracy. We become technology junkies. And the cost of this dependency upon technology is that it demands dependency upon the many institutional structures which "promote, regulate, and finance it." We had thought that within the solid walls of the academy we were safe. Not so, says Wilshire: "The university is no ivory tower sealed off from the world. The dominant secular-scientific ideal of knowledge impinges particularly strongly on how professional academic knowers narrate their lives and strive to form an identity" (53).

To form this identity, we have, in our reverence for technology and specialization, given rise to the "profes-



sionalization of the university.” And this, Wilshire assures us, is not a good thing. It has engendered the “relative neglect of undergraduates and of the intergenerational task of passing on achieved modes of humanness and of reconstructing civilization: The never ending challenge of birth, growth, procreation, decay, death, as it presents itself anew to every generation. The professional self tends to be atomistic and egoistic, conceiving itself as existing in one point-instant after another — until its last instant ends it” (71). And how does this affect us, as faculty and administrators? Listen:

● As with all bureaucracies, each department becomes so absorbed in its immediate operations and their proliferating detail that it cannot try to comprehend the whole of which it is part. For the same reason, administrators become absorbed in their bailiwick of ‘procedural’ rather than ‘subject matter’ concerns . . . (81)

Clearly, as faculty, we are losing touch with ourselves and our profession of teaching. As administrators, well, I quote Wilshire so that we at Kennesaw State College can get a peek in the window of the multiversity:

● . . . there is a growing body of administrators who have no idea what a university as an educational institution is or ought to be. They are wholehearted adherents of ‘rational management’ and the manipulation of humans as if they were objects. They actually prefer the external relations and foreign modes of governance which have filled the ethical vacuum of the university: modes from the openly commercial, political, or military worlds. The ethical vacuum demands such persons, pulls them in. They are those who prefer to manage, manipulate, push and intimidate rather than to lead by moral or intellectual example — assuming they could do so. (83)

This new breed of administrator Wilshire concludes are “thugs in tweeds,” and what they want is “productivity.” I have given a rather detailed sum-

mary of the first part and some of the second part of Professor Wilshire’s book. Part One is about “Problems of Self-Knowledge and Education.” In Part Two, “Academic Professionalism and Identity: Rites of Purification and Exclusion,” he details the “professionalizing” of the various disciplines from those within the natural and social sciences to medicine, law, and the humanities. He devotes a chapter to philosophy, his own discipline, and he engages in some pretty interesting and engaging “Bloom-bashing” as he takes on Mr. Humanities himself. Wilshire pulls out Bloom’s exclusion of “relevant evidence” in his proclamation of “essential truths about the universal human condition” (154). And what is this “relevant evidence” Professor Bloom excludes? Why, it is nothing less than the “vast majority of the human race.” In fact, Wilshire accuses, “It appears clearly in his sections on race and sex, in which his archaic, unexamined attitudes are easily noticeable at the end of our century. He fails to empathize with women and blacks, hence his thought about them is superficial” (155).

So having taken on Professor Bloom, not to mention the body of scientific and social thought and theory for the past three centuries, what does Wilshire propose that we do to save our souls and the soul of the university? To start with we “reintegrate self and world,” looking to twentieth-century thought to show us the way (it was seventeenth-century mechanistic thought that helped get us into this mess). And twentieth-century thought offers us — you got it: quantum physics! The “whole becomes essential to locating and specifying any member or part,” leading us to recognize:

● Since these wholes include consciousness, and since this involves spontaneities and unpredictabilities of the greatest human moment, the whole mechanistic conception of human individuals as atomic bits forced to move on a track of time must be critically reexamined or discarded. Human freedom, meaning, identity, realization and goodness open abruptly. (194)

The junctures at which Wilshire sees these openings are amazing and wonderful, as his final chapter, “Reclaiming the Vision of Education: Redefining Definition, Identity, Gender” heralds. Having acknowledged that our dualistic mode of thinking (body/mind, head/heart, student/teacher) is rooted in the patrilineal heritage we share, he suggests we set about to revise this discriminatory approach. We can start in the simple act of questioning gender-oriented modes of thought, behavior, and speech. In questioning gender domination and preference, he says: “We question the deepest assumptions about what things are. We redefine definition and reconceive individuation. Notice that typically the male tends to respond anxiously to engulfment in another, and to anything which threatens the ‘integrity’ of his bodily envelope. But if the pregnant female body were also regarded as paradigmatically human, the engrained masculine notion of individuation and individual integrity would change some, and the dread of engulfment as violation would diminish” (264). Yes, then, there is a point to all those Women’s Studies programs that proliferated in the 60’s.

And finally the words he leaves us with are at the same time wise and simple:

● The key point is that there is no substitute for human relationship and presence, for listening, for sharing silence and wonderment, and for caring. There is no expert knowledge of the human self which can be claimed by any particular discipline. (282)

Surely we all believe that or we wouldn’t be teachers, would we?

For a book that celebrates the community and communing of humanity, this book is not easy to read. The prose is turgid at points, the thought sometimes murky. But it is a book of a thinking human being who has taken the time to consider, to belabor, to reconcile his own reasons for being and doing, and in this sense, it is a fine book. And in this sense, also, it deserves reading — and paying attention to. ●

