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Citation 2/ ‘A truly democratic education is an education that equips people intellectually to defend and promote democracy within the political world; but in its own field, education must be ruthlessly aristocratic and high-brow, shamelessly geared towards excellence. The second aspect of the ivory tower that is constantly under attack is its *non-utilitarian character*. The heart of the problem is memorably expressed in the paradox of Zhuang Zi, a Daoist philosopher of the third century BC and one of the most profound minds of all time: “People all know the usefulness of what is useful, but they do not know the usefulness of the useless.” The superior utility of the university - what enables it to perform its function - rests entirely upon what the world deems to be its uselessness.’ **Simon Leys**; *The Hall of Uselessness*; Part Five; The Idea of the University

University – A Youth Processing Mill

We go to school, attend university, complete our assignments, sit for our exams, and often wonder why we do it. We question ourselves; why do we give our mind, body, and soul to education for 15 years of our life? What is the purpose of our existence? Why does anything matter? – a nihilistic approach also pointed out by Stanley Rosen in his book *Hermeneutics As Politics*, “If nothing is real, the real is nothing; there is no difference between the written lines of a text and the blank spaces between them...”(*Hermeneutics as Politics* 161) In this essay, I will try to make sense of my own questions regarding the connection between the current education system and ideology. I will do this by first highlighting how and why people feel their lives lack

purpose; leading them to succumb to ideology which gives false hope to them, and further linking it to how the modern university is also rooted in ideology because it is governed by sunburned intellectuals and not philosophers. I will attempt to clarify the two terms before juxtaposing the current system and the idea of the university. Finally, I will end with my reflections after incorporating philosophy under the broader umbrella of all that we know as art.

We live in echo chambers; we are just surrounded by the same thinking. We meet people who are just like us most of the time, and that's even what 'the norm' suggests; if you want to be a millionaire, spend time with a millionaire; if you want to be a CEO, spend time with a CEO; if you want to be a finance freak, spend time with, maybe a stockbroker. We think of ourselves as a perception of what others think of us, thus we constantly live in this perception of a perception of ourselves; hence our identity is made up by what our family or university thinks it should be. Some of us, however, don't fit into the current system; we don't think we fit into the 5 or 50 careers we are taught exist. And because we don't see ourselves in people, we try to fit ourselves into the boxes that we do see, which yields a life that's devoid of fulfilment, meaning and purpose. Which brings us back to the question, 'What is the purpose of our existence?' Because people can't answer the question themselves, they constantly are driven to turn to a supreme being to answer it for them. Some yield to the submission to divine will, while some, believing as Nietzsche did that 'God is dead', succumb to ideological doctrines to find the purpose of their existence. But ideology never answers the question because it has a futural aspect. It preaches to 'be sad today in order to be happy tomorrow'; but that tomorrow never comes because the future is an abstract ever-retreating horizon. The constant evocation of the future to refer to the 'good times' is a characteristic of nihilism which deprives the present of its presence.

The modern university is also deeply rooted in ideology which is the fundamental lie of the society. It has now become a factory to produce a homogenous set of graduates who are not taught to think independently, but rather to fit into the ideological doctrines that already exist. This modern university is governed by ‘sunburned’ intellectuals who hold a position of immense influence, power and authority, at least over the youth; because the youth is a community in its developing stage of life and thus most vulnerable to irresponsible methods of teaching. When it is stated that the ideas of intellectuals are sunburned, I understand it in the sense that intellectuals find themselves in a position where they are falsely blinded by the belief that they have overcome the trap of single-mindedness. However, the case is that they have only managed to fabricate a doctrine to justify their passions to win approval, not the other way around. They rouse the dormant passions within the youth without giving them the antidote to leverage them. These passions are not bad, they are very fundamental to our existence. They can be analogised with optimism bias in humans which can be mitigated but cannot be obliterated. In fact, even Camus sets the ground of human vehemence by stating, “We all carry within us our places of exile, our crimes and our ravages.”(*The Rebel* 6-7). You see, falling in love is easy because it comes naturally, it is learning how not to be blinded by it that is difficult. It’s easy to find someone attractive enough, smart enough, kind enough for you. But it’s hard to not let that relationship pose as a debacle to your rationality. Only a genuine philosopher has mastered control over this passion that is inherent in all humans, which is the differentiating factor between a genuine philosopher and an irresponsible intellectual, as Mark Lilla also explains in *The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics*, “One is tempted to say that it is this supreme self-awareness about how the mind handles ideas that distinguishes most fundamentally the

philosopher in Plato's sense from so many modern intellectuals." (137) Even Rosen mentions in his essay *Nihilism: A Philosophical Essay*, "Knowledge may well be power, but power can be used wisely or stupidly" (*Nihilism* 57), which I comprehend as sunburned intellectuals using knowledge 'stupidly' and philosophers using it 'wisely'. It is crucial that an ideal university endeavors to teach this intellectual self-control otherwise our passions will be set free to be incinerated but will never be channelised, leading to ghastly consequences.

A university should ideally be a place where thought is being thought about; where "scholars seek truth, pursue and transmit knowledge for knowledge's sake—irrespective of the consequences, implications and utility of the endeavour." (Leys, *The Hall of Uselessness* 418) However, this is far from what the modern university is judged by. Today it is judged by placements, reputation, connections, brand value, etc; in other words, it is judged in terms of its utility. Today education has become a commercial service that has propelled tyrants to extort big money out of the pockets of clueless youth. The university ceased to hold any ideal the very second (or probably before) a respected university in Europe chose to shut down the Department of Pure Philosophy due to a funding crunch because it "performed no visible service to society and state." (Leys, *The Hall of Uselessness* 420) People fail to understand, however, that the superior utility of education is something that cannot be measured, something that the world deems to be useless, but is in fact of prime importance—the ability to think. We keep measuring performance in terms of economics, finance, technology, etc. and that is perhaps the reason our technological progress is exponential but our moral progress remains stagnant even today. We fail to appreciate some things that cannot be quantified but hold immense significance in life. So, is education useless? Sure it is; keeping in mind that "uselessness is also the hallmark of

something truly priceless.” (Leys, *The View from the Bridge*) In a world that is so caught up in lies, where ideology threatens to brainwash and numb the mind like a sleeping pill, a university is indispensable to developing the human mind.

The development of the human mind is not something that is taught, and so is not a distinct field of education. Philosophy itself means love of wisdom; so, it is not a discipline, it is an inherent element of all disciplines. Philosophy, the love of wisdom, can lead to ground-breaking inventions; in fact, all sciences emerged from philosophy, which granted it its “world-changing power”. (Han) As Leszek Kolakowski mentioned in *Modernity on Endless Trial*, “Philosophers neither sow nor harvest, they only move the soil. They do not discover truth; but they are needed to keep the energy of mind alive.” (135) But today it seems that philosophy has degenerated into an academic, specialist discipline. In the world of academia, philosophy has become this weird playground of technicality and complexity that separates the curious masses from the intellectual elite; instead of clearly communicating their struggles they use convoluted jargon to put themselves on a pedestal.

There are no answers to philosophical questions; the pursuit of approaching these questions is itself more interesting than the answer—a paradox that makes philosophy more of an art. We humans are fallible beings; despite the world running in the quest for an errorless perfect utopia. We are taught that being flawed is something unacceptable, something frowned upon. Art understands that, and gives space to us to share our flaws, because as Rick Rubin in *The Creative Act: A Way of Being* mentions, “the goal of art isn’t to attain perfection. The goal is to share who we are. And how we see the world.” (148) Art is our refuge to make sense of the world, a world

that today is full of lies and corruption and violence. Increasing individualism is a human predicament, and art provides a medium to fulfil our basic tendency to belong, as Simon Leys subtly puts forward, “Life is a shitstorm, in which Art is our only umbrella.” (239)

The present times, we all know, are not good. As Camus also points out, “It is indeed true that we live in tragic times. But too many people confuse tragedy with despair.” (*Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 114) It is futile to have a pessimistic view about the future of the university, or rather, the world. It is important that people be aware of their vulnerabilities. It is important that people are exposed, to see if there is a box they like fitting in. Because you can’t be what you can’t see.

We cannot expect to live in a utopian world, all we can do is try to reach as close as we can by patient and persistent learning, just like the graph of $y=1/x$ never stops trying to reach the coordinate axes although it knows it never will.

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