

Destroying Education to Save It

Paul Hillmer

***Editor's Note:** Education in mission? This article is about education. It is about the mission of higher education. It is also an article in mission. The author takes humorously and seriously in a public university lecture not only the mission of his discipline but also his "own flawed, selfish, sinful self" and the kind of Christian love that "requires strength, maturity, self-possession, kindness, and a willingness to give others the same grace we crave for ourselves."*

Abstract: The following article is slightly adapted from the 14th Annual Poehler Lecture on Faith and Learning, delivered by the author at Concordia University, St. Paul, MN, on March 3, 2015. It is a rumination on the increasing commoditization of higher education and its corresponding emphasis on job preparation. While reflecting on the possible implications of these trends, Hillmer also considers how commoditization has shaped American Christianity and promotes the sustained significance of the liberal arts.

At 54 years old, what now seems like such a tender age, I am confronted with a cold, Mesozoic reality: I am a dinosaur. A hurtling asteroid has already radically changed my environment, and the only question I now face is how long I will survive? I am also a historian whose vocation is not to provide neat and tidy answers to complex questions, but to identify various discrete components of the past and consider if all aspects have been properly identified, considered, and contextualized. Because there is usually a dominant historical narrative written not so much by those who are most correct as by those who are the most powerful, I tend to look for underreported narratives written by underdogs and losers. I provoke people to reconsider their inherent narrative and include, as well as respect, other points of view. In short, history encourages me to love my neighbor as myself.

There is no doubt that education, particularly higher education, is changing at a dizzying pace. The question is where all this change is taking us. Certainly it is taking us to a place where education will look even less like that of my youth than it already does. In order to keep pace with economic, social, technological, generational, and other changes, education as we have known it for centuries will likely be destroyed in order to be saved.

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But to what kind of “destruction” am I referring? I have no idea. (This, by the way, is an answer we should all provide more often. We far too frequently offer or are asked to offer an opinion about something for which we have nowhere near enough information to even consider *having* an opinion. But we offer one anyway. Here endeth the first digression.)

Will education be destroyed like the caterpillar is “destroyed” to create the butterfly? Will a slow, earthbound, limited form of education be replaced by a transcendent, boundless education that helps its students take metaphorical if not actual flight? Or might it be more like what economist Joseph Schumpeter called Creative Destruction?¹ In an era when education has become more and more commodified, will the free market’s rather messy way of delivering progress define our path of change?

Or might education’s “destruction” be reminiscent of the great management-labor conflicts of decades past, such as when Will Carnegie’s grown-up son Andrew articulated the rights of labor, went fishing in Scotland, and had his partner Henry Clay Frick bust the union in Homestead, PA, precipitating violence and retribution that poisoned the steel industry for decades? Will we see broader conflicts in higher education such as those seen recently at Gustavus Adolphus College or the MNSCU System?²

Or what about a dystopian metaphor? On February 7, 1968, American forces obliterated much of the South Vietnamese village of Ben Tre. When reporter Peter Arnett asked about the incident, an army major allegedly replied, “It became necessary to destroy the town to save it.”³ In their efforts to remain viable in the face of massive change, will our institutions of higher learning so poorly embody a university education that we will wonder if they were worth saving?

Forces beyond our control

Much of the change we are currently experiencing is fueled not only by educational and technological forces, but others often far beyond our ken or control. The advent of for-profit entities, despite their often low graduation and high loan default rates, and our government’s one-size-fits-all response, particularly in the area of financial aid, has complicated our task considerably. As the pool of potential undergraduates has diminished, imperatives of financial stability, even survival, have unleashed a sobering reality with which boards of regents and executive administrators have long contended, while faculty and staff have been, if not oblivious, certainly insulated. Then there are the crises of our own making. For years we deferred the growing issue of affordability, while politicians and planners ignored the reductions of support for education and the middle class. Our church body never envisioned the need for an endowment for its colleges until it faced significant decline. The situation in which we now find ourselves is placing and will continue to

place pressures on the quality and even the fundamental definition of higher education.

Distortions of Christian perspectives

Lutherans hold to the doctrine of original sin. As Mary Ann Evans (aka George Eliot) colorfully put it, “We are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves.”⁴ In an environment of swift and uncertain change, people tend to place themselves or *be* placed in certain camps and spend as much time as necessary entrenching their own opinions and vilifying those of their rivals to ensure their own peace of mind and sense of superiority. In this kind of unpleasant contest, the key element is power. In a university, one might argue, knowledge is power. Socrates and Plato argued that an idea is the most powerful, the most real thing in the universe. But historians tend to agree with George Orwell: “Who controls the present controls the past . . . [W]ho controls the past, controls the future.”⁵ History—or more generally, information—does not speak for itself; rather it is shaped by human beings into a narrative that may be instructive or may be manipulative.

Twenty-first century American Christians often, to our detriment, not only ignore these realities, but make matters worse by employing a kind of pseudo-spiritual reductive deduction:

I want something

I pray for something

I get that something.

Therefore God wants me to have that something.

Those adversely affected by my having it should accept their role in the Divine Plan. People who disagree with me are not only against me; they are against God.

It’s doubtful that we actually believe this, but it is often how we behave. Now you might rightly say, “Look here: materialism is hardly uniquely American.” True. But Roland Delattre suggests that starting with Jonathan Edwards and Ralph Waldo Emerson and continuing all the way to Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker and Joel Osteen, Americans have suffered from what he called “Supply-Side Spirituality,” the belief that material abundance rather than scarcity is the inherent nature and destiny of every true American.⁶ All too often we believe we are meant to have our way.

One of the great American Christian minds of the twentieth century, Reinhold Niebuhr, would want to slap us back into reality. (By the way, I have always wanted to study how American society went from upholding people like Niebuhr as spokesmen for Christianity in the public arena, to the 1980s when the go-to guy was Jerry Falwell. Here endeth Digression #2.) Niebuhr writes, “The Christian faith ought to persuade us that political controversies are always conflicts between sinners and not between righteous men and sinners. It ought to mitigate the self-

righteousness which is an inevitable concomitant of all human conflict.”⁷ “The will to live,” he concludes, “becomes the will to power.”⁸ As different interests contend with change, it is easy for individuals and especially, Niebuhr would argue, groups with a common interest, to become Machiavellian. After all, in a contest between the two, most people would rather win than be right. The winner, after all, controls the discourse and proclaims he is right even if he isn’t. Even Jesus’ disciples couldn’t control themselves. After witnessing His death and resurrection, after sitting at His feet for forty days as He prepared them for what we now call Pentecost, they asked a completely self-interested, political question: “Lord, are You now going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” These impulses, as natural as they are, are both anti-Christian and anti-higher education.

It’s not that powerful people are bad and powerless people are good, but consider a corollary to 1 Timothy 6:10: the love of power is the root of all kinds of evil. It is often the case that those who seek power the most, especially power that privileges one interest over another, should be trusted with it the least.

Power and pragmatism

A discussion about power and the problems associated with it is important, because colleges and universities have moved from an era of partnership in decision-making to one of increasing centralization. This transition may indeed be necessitated for a number of reasons already enumerated, but in the midst of dizzying change that power must be wielded judiciously. By what yardstick might it be assessed? Using both Christianity and history as a gauge, one question and its corollary are most instructive: Is there a cost to telling truth to power? Is the practice encouraged in the spirit of Christian humility, as well as the understanding that multiple perspectives are key in the decision-making process, or is it discouraged, even punished? This question is the same whether one is the power in the scenario, the peer, or the peon, and the issue so old and pervasive that it is one of the many reasons faculty seek tenure.

Since historians examine minority opinions, and since I now hold a minority opinion, I’d like to ruminate on the nature of higher education in my own shrinking universe. A ship is safe in harbor, but that’s not what ships are for. A university is safe following the latest trends and popular expectations; but that is not what universities are for. Yes, one must be realistic. Only obscenely well-endowed schools have the luxury of even considering such a credo. But we’re going to remain in my universe for a few minutes.

High schools are already spending more time on math, science, and “career skills.” Governors in Florida, Texas, and North Carolina say that they will refuse to spend taxpayer money on students majoring in the humanities. Virginia law now requires all institutions to list their majors and the starting salary each of its

graduates can expect.⁹ These and numerous other forces suggest that higher education must focus more and more on career preparation. Yet here are a few problems to consider: First, many freshmen come to school undecided. Most recent statistics indicate that 50–70% of them change their majors at least once; most at least three times before they graduate.¹⁰ Going through a fast-tracked, more career-based program won't work for some. Second, a thorough scan of various university career counseling sites reveals a common theme: This generation will be changing not only jobs, but *careers*, on several occasions during the course of their lives. By spending more time on a single area, are we really giving our students the best preparation for their future? Some students prepare for a job they eventually abandon. For example, the Minnesota Department of Education reports that this state loses a third of its new teachers within their first five years.¹¹ Across the board, people often see their jobs simply as essential but unpleasant means to an end. A 2013 Conference Board survey reveals less than 50% of American workers were happy in their job.¹² Then there's the current state of our public discourse.

Cultural forces

Some of us remember the days when newsmen were the most trusted people in America. Today we primarily have two types of mainstream media: divisive and banal. The former encourages us to hunker down in our own intellectual bunkers, hearing only what strokes our egos and rationalizes our biases. It primarily provides scapegoats for rather than careful analysis of the pressing problems of our day. The latter features the cute, the gossipy, the violent, the disastrous, the sybaritic, and the eye-catching, often served with a heaping helping of hysteria: political coverage more akin to stenography than journalism, and—my favorite—invitations for mutually ignorant people to “weigh in” with their opinions, as if news programs can't afford to alienate a single viewer or sponsor.

These days the news is influenced as much by advertising revenue as sitcoms and reality shows. Money—when used to tell us what to buy, how to vote, and what to think—has become all but synonymous with power, determining what the media say and don't say, driving to an ever-greater degree the most important decisions in health care, bathing our every experience in product placement, and surveiling our every real and digital movement to better identify our buying habits. Most disturbingly, with the help of our openly partisan Supreme Court, money pollutes our political process with unlimited sums from special interests masquerading as social welfare organizations. Money—often in this context better described as lucre—not only equals power, it equals free speech. As Mark Leibovich has opined in his illuminating but depressing *This Town*, our so-called public servants are now a permanent feudal class of insiders who never leave Washington and are happy to enhance their personal welfare at the expense of representative government and the common good. DC is now the wealthiest city in the nation, home to seven of the

country's ten wealthiest counties. "Political Washington," he writes, "is an inbred company town where party differences are easily subsumed" by a desire to gain wealthy corporate patrons to help with reelection and through which one can find a cushy corporate job in retirement. "Cowardice," concludes Leibovich, "is rewarded every step of the way."¹³ In short, linking information and politics to commerce has contributed mightily to the debasement of public discourse.

What do Christians have to say on these important public issues? We are mostly silent. Perhaps it's because we would rather win than be right on our issues of choice. Should we be so shocked, then, that Millennials have less and less interest in the church, the news, and the political process?

A little more than a hundred years ago, John Alexander Smith wrote, "Nothing that you will learn in the course of your studies will be of the slightest possible use to you . . . save only this, that if you work hard and intelligently you should be able to detect when a man is talking rot, and that, in my view, is the main, if not the sole, purpose of education."¹⁴ Hyperbole aside, in a society where power, expressed primarily through money and repetition, are destroying our ability, even our desire to think critically, deeply, and compassionately about anything, this purpose seems every bit as essential in the age of the internet as it did in the age of the fountain pen.

What is higher education for?

What is higher education's role in addressing these pressing social, intellectual, and spiritual problems? In my shrinking universe, no one answers, "Spending more time on job preparation" or "If only we could find a way to make the liberal arts relevant." It's understood that in the body of education, the body politic, the body of society itself, the liberal arts are the connective tissue that holds everything together and helps everything make sense. In my universe, any message, any text is only as important as its context, its subtext, and often its pretext. Words are understood properly only when I know who says them and for what purpose, when I listen to thoughtful critical responses, and when I have a sense of whether the narrative is really even starting in the right place to create the greatest opportunity for objective understanding. In my universe, much is ineffable, which is why I lean so heavily and so happily on art, music, literature, and drama in all of their rich forms. It's why after a worship service a meaningful song often sticks in the heart and mind longer than a good sermon.

But you needn't take the word of a dinosaur. When the American Academy of Arts and Sciences assembled a fifty-four-person commission in 2013 to contemplate the future of the Humanities and Social Sciences, passionate advocates arose from perhaps unexpected places. James McNerney, the CEO of Boeing, said that high-tech manufacturing requires skilled engineers, but they wouldn't advance without a broader array of skills, especially communication and interacting with culturally

diverse others. According to General and Ambassador Karl Eikenberry, weapons can protect national security only so far. Equally essential are the understanding of foreign languages, foreign histories and cultures, and different beliefs and ethical systems. The longtime head of Lockheed Martin, Norman Augustine, described as “The Father of STEM,” stated that collecting evidence, weighing interpretations, and making arguments, core skills for creative workers and good citizens, require broad training across the arts and sciences. America’s single greatest educational deficit, he said, is in history.¹⁵ (I’ll be sure to send him a thank-you note.)

Even so, we live in a culture that has commodified pretty much everything, including religion. During an earlier period of my career, I read a number of histories studying the development of American Christianity with a critical eye. There are those who might ignore or even scorn their views, but I have never understood that impulse. It is a curious but common phenomenon to find Christians within their own circle of faith freely admitting their sins and failings, while suddenly becoming “perfect” when attacked from the outside. As a result we often miss out on valuable opportunities to gain wisdom and insight and engage in constructive dialog. Leaders in the Catholic Church are learning a very hard and very expensive lesson on treating the institution of the church as if it were as unassailable as God.

The church and higher education—one view

Here is just one example of a critic who has something useful to say both to the church and to those of us who teach at any level. In *Selling God*, R. Laurence Moore asserts that from the beginning, American religious leaders participated in a process through which “religion’s initial role ‘in the marketplace,’ its acting as an independent influence,” gave way to its second role, “cooperation in making itself a competitive item for sale.” This was inevitable, he argues, since the church can only “remain culturally central insofar as it learns to work with other things that are central.”¹⁶ Clergymen in the colonial period, for example, often wrote their own versions of sensational, even lurid stories popular at the time, justifying their methods by concluding with a moral lesson. But that’s not why people read their stories. Owing to the first amendment and numerous state laws denying churches state funding, ministers strove to fill seats and maintain their status as influencers and arbiters of high culture. Churches influenced many positive social changes, such as improvements in numerous public environments, but their desire for popularity and prosperity, as well as new forms of entertainment in saloons, parks, theaters, camps, sporting arenas, and vaudeville shows, and new technologies like the Nickelodeon, cinema, phonograph, radio, and television led them to one compromise after another. Christians were often active participants in, rather than passive victims of, this transformation since, in Moore’s view, religion must either “keep up with other cultural aspects of national life, including the commercial forms, or it has no importance.”¹⁷ Did church leaders set out to create a market system of competing

denominations, or to become “deeply implicated in a commercial means of tapping popular sentiment” that made the church captive to popular tastes and norms?¹⁸ Even Moore says no. Nonetheless, they did. Are all of Moore’s arguments and presuppositions unassailable? Of course not. Is there far more than a grain of truth in his observations and more than enough cause for the church to think both seriously and penitentially about them? Most certainly.

Education as commodity: a force to contend with

Until the last thirty or so years, higher education was largely insulated from the commercializing effects of our culture. There were enough students to go around, a broad consensus about the value of a college degree, and no great need to spend money on advertising. The best hope middle-class parents had for making their children’s lives better than their own was to invest in higher education. But then came, among other things: trickle-down economics, the twenty-four-hour news cycle, NAFTA, a lowering birth rate, wage stagnation, and the Great Recession. Since middle-class incomes didn’t keep pace with the cost of higher education, parents began fearing for their children’s post-graduation job prospects. In that context, the process of commoditizing higher education has kicked in with a vengeance. The dominant narrative, “making college pay”—immediately, overtly, and primarily professionally—is coinciding with protean changes in information and communication technology that have accelerated our expectations that everything should be easy, free, and immediate, while making available massive amounts of information once the exclusive domain of professionals like doctors, lawyers, and yes, college professors.

In this environment, education seems marketed more as a private asset than a public good. Particularly for its fastest-growing segment, online degree completion and graduate programs often marketed to working adults, convenience is the key component in selling the “product,” and understandably so. For example, the ad for Lindenwood College’s Accelerated Degree Program reads, “Get your degree. Keep your life”¹⁹—a great slogan perhaps carrying an unintended message: education should be easy. No sacrifices should be required. We can’t ask too much of you. In this environment, students often see themselves as customers; and, as the old saying goes, the customer is always right. This perception can blur the line between education and commerce, between a teaching relationship and a transactional one. In this environment, the erosion or even the eradication of classes and subject areas without an obvious vocational link can be seen as a necessity. Many schools are cutting pieces out of what for many, many years has been considered a seamless cloth; and the first thing deemed expendable, or at least reducible, are the humanities. Like it or not, this is what the marketplace is demanding. After all, as Larry Moore suggests, those who wish to remain competitive, perhaps even those who wish to survive must “keep up with other cultural aspects of national life,

including the commercial forms, or [they have] no importance.” As a result, tensions between educational and market imperatives are likely to only increase.

Toward a conclusion

Given the amount of time I’ve spent questioning some of the assumptions of the contemporary higher education marketplace, you might justifiably think “this speech is positively Shakespearian: a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”²⁰ I’m not saying that the world or even the university would be better if everyone studied more history. (I’m thinking it, but I’m not saying it.) Yes, students certainly need to be prepared for life in the modern world, with all of its scientific, mathematical, technological, commercial, ethical, and other challenges; and certainly we must do all within reason to help students graduate with as little debt as possible. Yes, career preparation is critical. But these ideas aren’t getting equal time here, because they don’t need it. They are everywhere. Nothing that is truly of benefit to our students is objectionable. But shouldn’t we think about both the long-term and the short-term, about how students will make a living *and* have a life?

Since World War II, one of American higher education’s marks of greatness is that it has boldly proclaimed that a broadly-based, intellectually challenging education that creates thoughtful, informed, active citizens is not meant for elites only, but for anyone who wants it. What concerns me about its current direction is that it seems to imply that was a mistake.

Where do we go from here?

So what is the future of higher education in this country? If I knew, I’d be on my private jet flying to another high-priced consultation. My task is to examine underreported aspects of the past, including the recent past, that may help us illuminate our experience. These observations do not come from a fear that higher education is doomed or its leadership ill-informed. What all this means and where it will all lead will be decided by people not only more powerful but more broadly aware than I. But I hope they won’t mind people outside the circle expressing legitimate concerns or respectfully testing an assumption or two.

What is the best environment in which these changes will occur, at least at universities wishing to uphold Christian teaching? At first blush, my answer will seem so simplistic and silly that you’ll probably wonder if I flew to a Colorado head shop and smoked my way through a ganja buffet. Let’s talk about love—1 Corinthians 13, to be precise—and in my final digression, let me simply say this chapter is the most egregiously misappropriated biblical wisdom in the history of American Christendom. As you must know, nowhere in this chapter is there any indication that St. Paul’s observations are meant for married couples. So when he says love is patient, kind, not boastful or proud, not self-seeking, easily angered, or

willing to dishonor others, and incapable of keeping a record of wrongs, he isn't showing us how to treat those we already love better. He's speaking to and about all of us. For our purposes he might say, "If I get A's in all my classes but don't have love, I am fingernails on a chalkboard. If I get the best teaching evaluations of all time and execute more scholarship than all my colleagues combined and don't have love, I am the longest, most boring meeting ever. If I enhance the prestige and guarantee the financial security of my university but have not love, I am nothing."

The role of love (Love conquers all)

Since love is such an abused, multipurpose word in our language, we might use "respect," or resisting the urge to turn people or their ideas into abstractions or obstacles. Immanuel Kant said it well: People should not be treated merely as a means to other people's ends.²¹ Perhaps we could manage to view 1 Corinthians 13 in a Christocentric rather than an egocentric way. The former understands, "This is who Christ calls me to be"; the latter insists, "This is how others should be treating me." Perhaps we could transcend the binary tendencies so deeply ingrained in our culture: black or white, right or wrong, Republican or Democrat, Tastes Great or Less Filling. Perhaps we need not commit to always being swift and efficient or slow and deliberate, emphasizing the institution or the individual, or looking more like a corporation or a community. And at all times, I must start any conversation I have with anyone, no matter how contentious it may be or how right I think I am, with a clear sense of my own flawed, selfish, sinful self. I should be the publican in the back of the church crying out, "Lord, help me, a sinner," or the person using the jaws of life to extract the redwood from my own eye before commenting on the speck in my neighbor's.

Power may be the ultimate aphrodisiac, as Henry Kissinger once famously proclaimed, and in uncertain times it is the weapon to which we most readily resort; but love is the ultimate expression of who we were created to be. This is neither a "Minnesota Nice" kind of love that smiles and nods but never says what needs to be said, nor a "take no prisoners" kind of love, where the message, no matter how valid or urgent, is undermined by the tactless or dismissive way it is delivered. It requires strength, maturity, self-possession, kindness, and a willingness to give others the same grace we crave for ourselves. I for one have a long way to go in simply understanding it, to say nothing of living it; but it's worth the effort, both as a Christian and a historian.

In Proverbs 16:16 we read, "How much better to get wisdom than gold, to choose understanding rather than silver." What will "wisdom" and "understanding" mean in higher education and in society in the future? What do they mean now? I don't know, but I can tell you this: There is not a day that goes by that I am not reminded of and grateful for the tremendous privilege I've been given to be a learner,

a scholar, a teacher, an author, and a colleague alongside a truly inspiring group of faculty and staff. And, dinosaur though I am, I will enjoy looking for an answer to this and other questions until I am extinct.

Endnotes

- ¹ The market “incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one. This process of Creative Destruction is the essential fact about capitalism.” Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 83.
- ² See <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/02/07/gustavus-adolphus-faculty-push-back-against-president-aid-confidential-leak-site> and www.startribune.com/local/blogs/282621881.html (accessed December 15, 2014).
- ³ See <http://aphelis.net/destroy-village-order-save-unknown-1968/> (accessed November 19, 2014).
- ⁴ George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003), 211.
- ⁵ George Orwell, *1984* (New York: Signet Classics, 1977), 35.
- ⁶ Roland Delattre, “Supply-Side Spirituality: A Case Study in the Cultural Interpretation of Religious Ethics in America,” in *Religion and the Life of the Nation*, ed. Rowland A. Sherrill (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 84–108.
- ⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, “Why the Church is Not Pacifist,” from *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr* (New York: Yale University Press, 1986), 114.
- ⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Know Press, 2001), 14.
- ⁹ See <http://today.duke.edu/2013/10/rhbcollegeboard> (accessed January 11, 2015).
- ¹⁰ See http://www.nbcnews.com/id/10154383/ns/business-personal_finance/t/college-freshmen-face-major-dilemma/ (accessed January 11, 2015).
- ¹¹ See http://www.twincities.com/localnews/ci_26829333/minnesota-schools-trying-retain-young-teachers (accessed January 11, 2015).
- ¹² See <http://www.conference-board.org/blog/post.cfm?post=1927> (accessed December 27, 2014).
- ¹³ Mark Leibovich, *This Town: Two Parties and a Funeral, Plus Plenty of Valet Parking* (New York: Penguin Group, 2013), 104. The “cowardice” comment was made on Bill Moyers’ show, August 23, 2013.
- ¹⁴ See <http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/27314.html> (accessed December 19, 2014).
- ¹⁵ See <http://www.humanitiescommission.org/> and <http://today.duke.edu/2013/10/rhbcollegeboard> (accessed January 11, 2015).
- ¹⁶ R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 6.
- ¹⁷ Moore, 65.
- ¹⁸ Moore, 119.
- ¹⁹ See <http://www.lindenwood.edu/lead/> (accessed December 14, 2014).
- ²⁰ Macbeth, Act 5, Scene 5.
- ²¹ This is known as Kant’s “Mere Means Principle,” or “Second Categorical Imperative.” See <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-moral/> (accessed January 22, 2015).