Hugh of St. Victor: Medieval Wisdom for Modern Educators

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Abstract
Using Hugh of St. Victor (1096–1141) as an example, the article outlines key features of medieval educational assumptions and practices that can be drawn upon to challenge and offer an alternative to the ethos and priorities in universities today. Hugh’s writings are analysed with a view to demonstrating how an approach to education that is illuminated by religious faith has the resources to provide a more holistic route to higher learning than is currently available. His understanding of the arts, reading, memory and restoration, together with his treatment of the discipline of the body, the role of example and imitation, and the influence of living in community on student learning – all combine to promote rationality, realism and virtue in service of wisdom.

Keywords
Hugh of St. Victor, Abbey of St. Victor, the Didascalicon, formation of novices, medieval and modern universities

While disputation and dialogue have always been at the heart of university teaching and learning, other features of medieval education can strike a discordant note in the modern university. Among such features might be included the bearing of the virtues and affections on the development of rationality and wisdom, the importance given to the integration (rather than the separation) of the intellectual and the spiritual dimensions of our being, and the notion that university teachers should act, not just as exponents of knowledge and facilitators of learning, but also as exemplars and models of the right living out of that knowledge. There was also the expectation that, in addition to the labours of teachers and students, our minds might be both illuminated and empowered by a divine source.

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Furthermore, it was firmly believed that this divine source provided the foundation for the ultimate unity of all knowledge. Attempts to import any of these aspects of education – once considered normal and necessary in the early years of the medieval university and by scholars more generally (whether Christian, Jewish or Muslim) – into contemporary universities (with the possible exception of a few faith-based ones which adopt a more explicitly counter-cultural stance) would be interpreted as provocative. They would be felt by many to fall into one of the following errors: intruding into the private realm, undermining autonomy, unduly moralistic, culturally imperialistic, demeaning to the professional status of academics, far too accommodating to and gullible about claims made by religious communities, and corrosive of that specialisation and differentiation in scholarly disciplines that has led to a never-ending expansion of knowledge. (For examples of the suspicion of, hostility to and discrimination against those holding or seeking to express religious perspectives in the academy today, see Kanpol and Poplin, 2017).

While not wishing to lament the loss of a former age, nor to denigrate the genuine strengths of contemporary universities, in this article I revisit the aforementioned, once commonplace, features of medieval education in order to make explicit the challenge they pose for the assumptions that appear to govern university teaching and learning today. As a way into commenting on these features, I will draw from the writings of a pre-eminent medieval scholar who lived in the era not long before the rise of universities, Hugh of St. Victor (1096–1141). In particular, I will focus on what he had to say about the nature of and preconditions for learning and how these relate to moral and spiritual development. My hope is that such an encounter might present alternative and enriching approaches to teaching and learning today, expand the options open to students and their teachers and, in the process, help to reduce the gaps that often appear between the worlds of academe and everyday life.

After a few introductory remarks, the paper engages with Hugh’s educational thinking in four steps, leading to a brief final section. Firstly, both Hugh and his abbey are put in their historical context and an initial summary of his view of education is provided. Secondly, I focus on his major educational treatise, the Didascalicon and draw key themes from that work; these relate to his understanding of the arts, reading, memory and restoration. In the third step, I turn to Hugh’s guidebook on the formation of novices, examining three topics with implications for learning: the discipline of the body, the role of example and imitation, and the influence of horizontal and peer learning. Fourthly, there is a comparison of the ethos of the university today with Hugh’s educational outlook, with a view to bringing out more explicitly both similarities and differences of assumptions and priorities. Finally, I raise the question: is there a need and an opportunity today to retrieve key aspects of Hugh’s thought; is time for a contemplative turn in education?

What was the spirit that animated many medieval educators, of whom Hugh of St. Victor was a leading example? What larger project did they believe they were embarked upon? Why did they think their efforts mattered? What were the underlying assumptions and ideals that inspired, governed and guided their work? The art of reading and the art of living are parallel works, to be taken together as representing Hugh’s understanding of education and formation. The basic orientation, fundamental assumptions, dominant
practices, most urgent problems, common aspirations and expectations, leading priorities, framing concepts, underlying commitments and aversions, pervasive sensibilities and wider shared horizons – all these comprise what we mean when we refer to a community’s outlook, mental milieu or worldview. Educational and academic practices, such as reading and following a prescribed methodology, that on the surface might appear similar in both medieval and modern times, in reality functioned quite differently for exponents of both reading and scholarship. This is not to suggest that either medieval or modern societies are homogeneous. People of all historical eras respond to the norms of their time with varying degrees of acceptance, resistance and of consistency, depending on context, upbringing, experience, accident, opportunity, resources and intentionality. (For a brief overview of medieval understandings of teachers and scholars; of scientia and sapientia; the inextricable links between intellectual, moral and spiritual virtues; and similarities and differences between the ethos of medieval and modern universities, see Sullivan, 2018, 55–60).

Hugh and his Abbey

The Abbey of Saint Victor was a centre of higher learning, just outside Paris, which attracted many creative scholars and teachers, especially in its early days and for much of the twelfth century. Its residents were Canons Regular, priests living in community under the Rule of St. Augustine. Neither secular clergy nor monks, they combined religious devotion, academic studies and attention to developing moral virtue; their ethos exuded a distinct blend of emphasis on letters, manners and spirituality. Apart from stressing the value of learning, virtue and the path of personal holiness, their goal was to provide a haven of communal harmony internally and a ministry to the wider community externally. Their daily lives were regulated by precise rules governing their behaviour, movement and modes of communication; these rules laid down guidance about speech, dress, diet, who should be imitated and which virtues should be pursued.

The historian Ian Wei sets Hugh of St. Victor in an intermediate position between that of the monks and that of the teachers in the schools – the early scholastics. While many monks, such as Bernard of Clairvaux, thought that it was necessary to reject the world and its values (including secular knowledge) in order to arrive at religious knowledge and criticised the teachers of the Parisian schools firstly, for having dishonourable motives for study, such as greed, desire for fame or self-indulgent delving in an unbridled curiosity, and secondly, for not providing the appropriate conditions for fostering true knowing, (Wei, 2012, 85), the Victorines stood out among religious communities for the way they held together, on the one hand, the traditional pathways of communal prayer and ascetic discipline, and, on the other hand, intellectual inquiry and involvement in the world beyond the abbey. James Halverson points out that ‘Hugh did not demand that his students become scholars, pastors, or ascetic mystics, though some did. The school of St. Victor taught students who would go on to “good jobs” in royal and ecclesiastical courts or noble and merchant households. These influential knowledge workers were ideally placed to apply their restored minds to restoring the human community’ (Halverson, 2011, 50).
Hugh came to St. Victor around 1115, first to learn, but by 1120 he was teaching there, eventually elected as abbot in 1133, a post he held until his death in 1141. The various schools of Paris in the 12th century, including that at St. Victor, attracted in large numbers many of the best and most influential scholars in Europe. Not long after his death his reputation was such that he was considered to be a second Augustine, a title for which there could be no greater accolade among medieval scholars. In the 13th century, Bonaventure, a major figure who combined university teaching and writing advanced works of theology with leadership of the rapidly growing Franciscan order and the provision of important spiritual guidance for his spiritual brothers, praised Hugh for displaying the qualities of Augustine, Gregory the Great and Dionysius and for excelling three of Hugh’s contemporaries who developed the thought of these masters, Anselm, Bernard of Clairvaux and Richard of St. Victor (Bonaventure, 1996, 45).

Hugh left a large body of writing that was immensely influential, being read throughout France, Germany and Eastern Europe, mostly by Benedictines, Cistercians, Augustinians and Carthusians (Illich, 1993, 85. n. 43). This work included the Didascalicon, on the right way to approach learning, De institutione novitiorum (Hugh of St Victor, 1997), a practical guide for novices (which also includes much of educational relevance), many works on meditation and prayer (Hugh of St Victor, 1956), plus other works of scriptural exegesis, together with his magisterial study of the sacraments (Hugh of St Victor, 2007). In all of these, he maintained a focus on the formation of the person and how to read rightly, the close connection between knowledge, discipline and virtue and the necessity of establishing harmony between external behaviour and the inner self. Hence, one is struck by the importance he attached to aspects of life rarely thought to have educational significance today, for example, clothing, gestures, manner of talking and etiquette at table.

For Hugh, the first step on the path to God is taken when one learns how to govern one’s body, for without such mastery, the inner life will remain at the mercy of physical needs and drives. Similarly, the path to truth also depends on self-discipline, for scholarship has its own forms of asceticism. Hugh stresses the importance of imitating the good example given by others, both within and beyond the community of Saint Victor, and allowing oneself to be deeply influenced by such example. Self-discipline was to be joined by sociability, humility, courtesy and spirituality, all founded on and enlightened by sacred scripture and secular learning. These qualities were conducive to study because they helped to detach a person from self-importance, possessiveness, pride, distractions and noise. He even went so far as recommend exile, or being on foreign soil, as a factor likely to enhance the conditions for studying, because the discipline of leaving transitory things behind and being on unfamiliar territory helped one to be more detached from comforts and more open to receive and to learn.

Underlying Hugh’s vision for formation and education was a positive anthropology, a strong belief in human dignity, based on humanity’s status as made in the image of God, a conviction that each person is capax dei – able to receive the divinising grace of God and capable of being perfected despite current shortcomings. He laid out a curriculum and programme of formation that was carefully constructed to develop the rationality, emotions, will, imagination, spirituality, character and moral life and sense of community
of students. This added up to a comprehensive, coherent and integrated worldview. The path that led to this included the removal of obstacles to right seeing and living, training in the habits of attention, openness to truth and wisdom, followed by engagement with, loving relationship with and performance of the truth encountered. Truth and virtue were intimately connected for Hugh; one could not reach either without the support of the other.

**The Didascalicon**

Composed in late 1120s, written for those embarking on higher education (although at a younger age than is the case today), highly influential, both immediately and for several centuries afterwards, the *Didascalicon*, Hugh’s most famous work, was intended to show how education can contribute to the restoration of divine wisdom in human persons who had lost their capacity to receive this wisdom because of sin. Such restoration required, for Hugh, the contemplation of truth and the practice of virtue. Salzmann says of the *Didascalicon* ‘It is celebrated, along with John of Salisbury’s later *Metalogicon* (1159), as the most important work on human learning from the 12th century renaissance’ (Salzmann, 2016, 142).

The programme of studies outlined and explained by Hugh was simultaneously noetic (concerned with our cognitive capacities), ethical (with implications for our behaviour) and spiritual (bearing upon our relationship with God). Hugh divided up the arts into four categories: theoretical (‘which strives for the contemplation of truth’), practical (‘which considers the regulation of morals’), mechanical (‘which supervises the occupations of this life’) and logical (‘which provides the knowledge necessary for correct speaking and clear argumentation’) (Hugh of St. Victor 1961, 60). The theoretical arts included theology, physics and mathematics (usually known as the quadrivium, which embraced arithmetic, music, geometry and astronomy). The practical arts covered ethics, economics and politics. The logical arts, or trivium, included grammar, rhetoric and logic (or dialectic). His inclusion of the mechanical arts (fabric-making, armament, commerce, agriculture, hunting, medicine and theatrics) was a significant innovation, indicating a concern for everyday life that displayed a more outward-looking perspective than that usually held in monasteries. As Paul Rorem notes, ‘Hugh shows a robust pleasure in the rich variety of our created world, the world of weaving and saddles, swords and trowels, commerce and orchards, fishing and porridge and mead’ (Rorem, 2009, 39; Hugh of St. Victor, 1961, 75–79). Contrary to what one might expect of a medieval member of a religious community, as Halverson underlines, ‘Hugh has an unequivocally positive view of commerce’ (Halverson, 2011, 49). ‘The pursuit of commerce reconciles nations, calms wars, strengthens peace and commutes the private good of individuals into the common benefit of all’ (Hugh of St. Victor, 1961, 77).

Taken together, this cluster of four types of arts is intended by Hugh to bring about a wide range of benefits. Firstly, it contributes to the apprehension of truth (both secular and sacred). Secondly, it facilitates the capacity for abstract thinking and decision-making (without which moral deliberation is not possible). Thirdly, it enhances our capacity to make our way in the world. Fourthly, it enables us to communicate clearly, honestly, rationally and persuasively. Fifthly, it provides the right conditions for the development of
wisdom. Sixthly, it puts in place the building blocks and essential skills and habits which equip us to continue learning thereafter, without the direction of teachers and on our own initiative: it makes life-long learning possible. Finally, it cooperates with God’s grace in restoring us to our authentic nature as beings made in the image of God and called to express that likeness in our relationship with the rest of creation. This spiritual significance of learning from the arts applies, for Hugh, not just to the learning of theology, but to all of the arts. Hugh’s programme for the arts is to be considered as a whole; each of the arts depends on all the others for its proper and optimal functioning. They are essentially interconnected: ‘These so hang together and so depend upon one another in their ideas that if only one of the arts be lacking, all the rest cannot make a man into a philosopher’ (Hugh of St. Victor, 1961, 89).

The arts were seen by Hugh as second-order activities, building upon activities normally carried out unreflectively in everyday life. Thus:

All sciences were matters of use before they became matters of art. … Before there was grammar, men both wrote and spoke; before there was dialectic, they distinguished the true from the false by reasoning; before there was rhetoric, they discoursed upon civil laws; before there was arithmetic, there was knowledge of counting; before there was an art of music, they sang; before there was astronomy, they marked off periods of time from the courses of the stars (Hugh of St. Victor, 1961, 59–60).

He quotes (Hugh of St. Victor, 1961, 94) with approval advice about the prerequisite conditions for and key factors underpinning study, advice attributed to Bernard of Chartres: ‘A humble mind, eagerness to inquire, a quiet life, silent scrutiny, poverty, a foreign soil’. These qualities indicate a more deliberately ascetic understanding of the nature of study than is commonly held today. While eagerness to learn, a quiet life and silent scrutiny seem obviously conducive to learning, being supportive of the necessary effort and concentrated focus, it is likely that humility, poverty and the sensibility of being a foreigner would come less readily to mind for 21st-century students. On humility, he claims that the student, first, should ‘hold no knowledge in contempt’; second, ‘that he blush to learn from no man; and third, that when he has attained learning himself, he not look down upon everyone else’ (Hugh of St. Victor, 1961, 95). On poverty, Hugh quotes Jerome: ‘A fat belly does not produce a fine perception’, meaning that self-indulgence, luxury and giving too much attention to satisfying the desires of the flesh are likely to act as impediments to the discipline required for fostering a yearning for learning. And, for those who aspire to become, in due course, a citizen of heaven, no land here should benefit from our ultimate loyalty: ‘The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land’ (Hugh of St. Victor, 1961, 101). In all these cases, commitment to the truth, which calls for dedication to virtue, requires a high degree of detachment from anything that might distract one from these goals.

In Didascalicon, Hugh deals with four steps which trace out the path towards perfecting the human person, all of which depend for their efficacy on the workings of divine grace: study or instruction, meditation, prayer and performance. The fifth step he
mentions, contemplation, is addressed in a separate work. ‘The first, study, gives understanding; the second, meditation, provides counsel; the third, prayer, makes petition; the fourth, performance, goes seeking; the fifth, contemplation, finds’ (p. 132).

His view of reading was more expansive than our own. For him, reading mediated between the world outside us (the macrocosm) and the world within us (the microcosm). All knowledge, if used properly, can play a part in cooperating with God in restoring in us our true nature and in restoring a fallen creation to right relation with its creator. The desire for truth is legitimate because it can orient us to find the divine source of all truths. The pursuit of learning, as Hugh acknowledged, can be ‘an intrinsically noble vocation, leading men to despise wealth and honours, to bear injuries with gladness, so as to dedicate themselves the more freely to the contemplation of higher things unimpeded by unworthy desires’ (CHECK Did 3.4). Gillian Evans notes the fear among many medieval thinkers that the pursuit of learning also has its shadow side, ‘because it could lead into the realms of trivial inquisitiveness, obsessive preoccupation, greed, unbridled desire, the playing with the fire of magic and superstition, where lay various kinds of profound danger to the soul’ (Evans, 1998, p. ix). His view of reading was also more expansive than ours in another way: beyond being a means to access and accumulate knowledge, reading had a soul-forming role; what was read was to be impressed on the reader’s character, reflected on, in the sense of being the object of meditation (focused scrutiny), and so internalised that it would be reflected (or expressed) in the reader’s consequent activity, self-presentation and communication.

The cultural commentator, Ivan Illich, wrote an extended reflection on the Didascalicon called In the Vineyard of the Text. Here, I pick out two of his observations about differences between Hugh’s age and our own, the first on the notion of there being a final cause and the second about the nature of reading as a bodily activity. Medieval scholars accepted the notion that there is a final cause behind all phenomena and actions; this final cause is their ultimate purpose, that for the sake of which a thing is done. This final cause, from our perspective, lies ahead of us as an invitation tugging us towards it, although from Hugh’s perspective, as a typical medieval thinker, this final cause is embedded already in reality. One of the reasons this teleological view is resisted today is that it seems to undermine our autonomy and our capacity to impose our purpose on the world, rather than, as pre-moderns saw it, accommodating ourselves to fit into a pre-ordained order (as created by God). For Hugh, there is a given structure and order to the universe; everything is interconnected because all things are bound together in the design of the creator. Illich notes that:

the thought of an ultimate goal of all readings is not meaningful to us. Even less is there any idea that such a goal could motivate or “cause” our action whenever we open a book. We are steeped in the spirit of engineering and think of the trigger as the cause of a process. We do not think of the heart as the cause of the bullet’s trajectory (Illich, 1993, p. 13).

We tend to think of reading as an activity that is silent, carried out by individuals in isolation from one another (rather than corporately, alongside others) and as something
that goes on ‘in our heads’, rather than as a physical activity. In contrast, as Illich points out, reading is experienced by Hugh as:

a bodily motor activity. … The lines [on the page] are a sound track picked up by the mouth and voiced by the reader for his own ear. By reading, the page is literally embodied, incorporated. The modern reader conceives of the page as a plate that inks the mind, and of the mind as a screen onto which the page is projected and from which, at a flip, it can fade. … For the monastic reader … the reader understands the lines by moving to their beat, remembers them by recapturing their rhythm, and thinks of them in terms of putting them into his mouth and chewing (Illich, 1993, 54).

Two further points about Hugh’s educational philosophy, as exhibited in the Didascalicon, should be made here: first, his understanding of memory and, second, the concept of restoration. Both mark out clear differences between medieval and modern conceptions of the mind and of the purpose of education.

Memoria, according to Hugh’s use of the term, might be described as an internally imagined and structured representation of the elements of the culture that was being imbibed by the student, a kind of mental map, or perhaps a floorplan of the house of knowledge. This inner representation of what was being learned was gradually built up by a docile acceptance of instruction and explanation, willingness to engage in the disciplines laid down by teachers, imitation of the example given by teachers, other model members of the community and the lives of the saints, constant repetition, patient attention to the prescribed texts and practices and adoption of the key images, metaphors and symbols that were deployed by Hugh and other Victorine teachers in order to organise and structure knowledge and feed the imagination so that this knowledge could be readily envisaged and brought to mind by students. For example, Hugh often made great play with such symbolic images as ark, building tree, house and book. One finds an extended deployment of the metaphor of tree in Book 2, chapter 15 of his first treatise on Noah’s ark:

the tree of life, the word of the wisdom of God, is sown in fear, watered by grace, dies through grief, takes root by faith, buds by devotion, shoots up through compunction, grows by longing, is strengthened by charity, grows green by hope, puts down its leaves and spreads its branches through caution, flowers through discipline, bears fruit through virtue, ripens through patience, is harvested by death, and feeds by contemplation (Hugh of Saint Victor, 1962, 93).

‘The ultimate aim of memoria was to make a particular text part of oneself, to allow it to be inscribed on one’s heart in order to build character, promote citizenship, instil prudence, engender piety, and ultimately to attain perfect happiness’ (Harkins, 2009, 35). Harkins quotes Jean Leclercq’s landmark study of monastic culture, The Love of Learning and the Desire for God:

For the ancients, to meditate is to read a text and to learn it ‘by heart’ in the fullest sense of this expression, that is, with one’s whole being: with the body, since the mouth pronounced it,
with the memory which fixes it, with the intelligence which understands its meaning, and with the will which desires to put it into practice’ (Leclercq, 1978, 21–2).

In contrast, the modern view of memory tends to limit its scope to that of a ‘data repository, which can be “out-sourced” to external substitutes (i.e., reference books or electronic media)’ (Coolman, 2010, 156). The very idea of training the memory, especially for students in higher education, seems outmoded and unnecessary, a quaint echo from a former age which did not benefit from modern technological aids for accessing information. However, despite contemporary neglect of, or even suspicion of the use of memory in education, Pope John Paul II laments the suppression of memorisation as an educational tool and argues that it continues to play a necessary and valuable part in any sound engagement with a living tradition (Pope John Paul II, 1979, #55).

As for restoration, when Hugh uses this term to describe how the arts in his curriculum operate as aids to bringing a person back into line with God’s original intention for humanity, he is suggesting a complex amalgam of notions, including to reform a person from their errant ways, to reshape the pattern of their lives, to liberate them from those proclivities that distort, weaken or even destroy their essential nature, to reconcile them with God and neighbour and to re-order their cognitive, moral and spiritual capacities so that these function properly. The arts should operate as remedies which address specific ailments to which humanity is prone. For Hugh, the theoretical, the practical and the mechanical arts address, respectively, wisdom, virtue and the needs of daily life; these arts are ‘remedies against three evils to which human life is subject: wisdom against ignorance, virtue against vice and need against life’s weaknesses’ (quoting Didascalicon 6.14, not included in Taylor’s edition). Since Christ is, for Hugh, the Wisdom from whom we have to learn how we can live rightly in relation to God, and since following Christ is our way to union with God, and since the way we learn who Christ is passes through scripture, which is received from the church, then the process of restoration and reformation, to which the arts contribute, might simultaneously be called one of ‘Christo-formation’, ‘churchification’ and ‘scripturalization’ (Coolman, 2010, 22), as well as of humanization.

The Formation of Novices

For Hugh, the world is a book written by the finger of God and the human person’s life, as expressed in words and actions, is also a book, from which her nature and character can be read. In his guide book for the instruction of novices, he quotes Proverbs 6: 12–14: ‘A scoundrel, a villain, wears deceit on the lips, looking askance, shifty of foot, wagging the finger’ to indicate that the body mirrors the internal state of a person and that it can be deployed to express as well as to hide malign as well as benign purposes. A major aspect of education, not addressed directly in Didascalicon, was the ordering of the body as an essential component in the process of restoring human beings to their true position as images of God. Thus, his De Institutione novitiorum (hereafter DIN) should be considered as a counterpart to and completion of his broader work on learning in Didascalicon. Falque (2011), in a significant article on DIN, views this work as transcending traditional teaching on the formation of novices by developing a philosophy of gesture and speech.
that exposes a rare harmony between the internal and external dimensions of our being. The path towards knowledge, discipline and goodness includes attention to our bearing and gestures, imitation of the saints (to bring us to reflect the divine likeness more closely), discernment of how to conduct ourselves in words and actions, orchestrating these (in church, cloister, refectory, chapter-house, dormitory or private cell), so that they fit harmoniously into the symphony of the community. Falque (p. 410), points out that attention to bearing, gesture and speech applies to teachers as well as to novices and students, by noting, in a striking play on words, that ‘il convient donc d’être en chair pour être en chaire’ – it is necessary to incarnate, to model in the flesh (one’s teaching) if one is to speak from the teacher’s desk (or, by implication, from the pulpit). He then goes on to quote Hugh: ‘The word of God comes to us each day under cover of a human voice’; the implication is that we are called to be that voice for each other.

Mirko Breitenstein (2014) traces the enduring influence of DIN across the next few centuries, not only in the formation of members of religious orders, but also in the education of lay people, especially at the courts of rulers. Hugh’s guidebook blends teaching about conduct, virtue, the relationship between the individual and his community, personal and communal salvation and heightening consciousness about the effects of actions on the human environment in which they occur. Its structuring principle is the integral relationship between knowledge, discipline and goodness, each being a precondition for the others.

Two ideas that seem counter-cultural in our contemporary university context pervade this treatise: firstly, the important role played in education and formation by the discipline of the body; and secondly, the strong emphasis put on example and imitation. After commenting on these two themes, I will draw out, as an implication of the second theme, a feature of monastic life that raises a challenge for contemporary universities in their dealings with students: the degree to which they promote learning from the example of their peers.

With regard to the first of these themes, Hugh believed that there is a close connection between the discipline of the body, moral maturity and correcting disorders of the mind. ‘Discipline is a shackle for cupidity, a prison for evil desires, a bridle for wantonness, a yoke for pride, a chain for anger; it subdues intemperance, binds light-mindedness, and stifles all the disorderly motions and illicit appetites of the mind’ (Porwoll, 2019, 140, quoting from DIN). Our movements, gestures and speech reveal our character, but if these are regulated, our character can be modified for the better. This will, in turn, enhance our capacity to seek, to welcome and to embrace truth. Mastering our outward behaviour has the additional benefit, for Hugh, of promoting harmony in the community of the abbey to which the novices seek to belong.

As for the second theme, Hugh constantly stresses the importance of learning from the example of others. This requires humility, deliberately setting out to imitate such examples, most especially of the saints. Such imitation depends upon a bending of the will and the subjection of pride, followed by a commitment to so act and speak that one’s actions and words can serve as an example and encouragement to others, inside and beyond the abbey. In advocating the need to imitate good example, Hugh was careful to distinguish seniority of rank from the worthiness of the exemplar; anyone could serve as a
model, if their behaviour called out for this. ‘Monks followed saintly models, written guides, “scripts”. They did not write their own script, as modern man is supposed to do’ (Spijker, 2004, 10–11). They did not prize originality or desire to stand out from their brethren; conformity to a rule and to a saintly model did not leave much room for self-expression, diverging from others or claiming a special identity for oneself. Following the example of the saints (who themselves have most closely imitated the example of Christ), in Hugh’s perspective, will improve and enhance our personhood, not suppress it. He warns the novices, ‘if I neglect to imitate the good I know, then I can say that my thought is right, but unprofitable. … It profits me nothing if I do not take it to myself as a pattern for living. For another person’s virtue is of no profit to me, if I neglect to copy it as far as I am able’ (Hugh of Saint Victor, 1962, 81). He draws upon an image commonly deployed among medieval writers, of a seal pressed into wax: ‘just as the wax into which a seal is pressed must be made soft in order to receive the form or image of the seal, so too must the hardness of human pride be softened by humility in order for the student to be re-formed into God’s image through the impression of the lives of the saints’ (DIN, quoted by Harkins, 2009, 283).

Hugh expected his students not only to be ready to imitate the saints and those of their elders who gave good example, but also their peers if these displayed qualities that merited emulation. In some respects, imitation of peers was easier because these fellow students were not so far in advance, in terms of virtue and studiousness, that their standards were unattainable. As Porwoll notes, ‘Peers offer models for imitation because their lives have admirable qualities still within our reach’ (Porwoll, 2019, 147). In fact, every member of the community at St. Victor should be considered a fellow disciple; even in a hierarchical society such as that which pertained in the 12th century, learning could be as much horizontal (between equals) as vertical (received from one’s teachers and superiors).

Horizontal learning occurs naturally when people associate with each other in community life and when they work together in some common endeavour. Mutual influence, imitation, modelling and observation lead them into a shared repertoire of practices, knowledge and beliefs. Long, Snijders and Vanderputten describe horizontal learning as ‘knowledge transmitted and acquired in a context of informal interactions, to which traditional categories such as “teachers” and “disciples” do not necessarily apply’ (Long, Snijders, and Vanderputten, 2019, 9). In these circumstances, ‘many skills and a great deal of knowledge – from cooking to singing, from adopting behavioural patterns to acquiring certain mindsets – were transmitted and acquired in a context of intense “horizontal” interactions’ (Long, Snijders, and Vanderputten, 2019, 10). This is particularly the case in a close-knit community such as a monastery, where ‘horizontal learning can be understood as the process of gaining increased familiarity with the performances, rituals and conventions that together formed the community’s repertoire’ (Snijders, 2019, 46).

Horizontal learning still has a part to play today, not on in the context of classroom group learning and via peer-to-peer and ‘study-buddy’ support systems, where there is physical presence, but also in blended learning which uses online learning systems (such as Moodle) which offer regular built-in opportunities for students to engage with their
tutor and with fellow students in raising questions and in sharing insights. These methods, however, in contrast to Hugh’s conception of community learning, often tend to omit consideration of moral and spiritual issues.

Hugh held to the notion of co-discipleship, where all acknowledge that they are subject to a divine teacher and master and where they are expected to serve as guardians of each other’s soul, offering mutual support, example and correction. Many factors influence how far horizontal or peer-to-peer learning takes place. These include the context in which a community is set, the purposes and priorities of participants in that community, their roles and relative status, the nature and quality of their relationships, their respective experiences and expertise, the degree of institutional support for collaboration and fostering friendships, and the presence or absence of agencies and demands that work against cooperation and reciprocal learning. Steckel notes of medieval religious communities, that, despite being strongly marked by hierarchical structure, horizontal learning was remarkably prominent, and also that their very functioning as a community of faith itself constituted a didactic space (Steckel, 2019). One might draw parallels here between the communal nature and horizontal learning that took place in religious communities such as that at St. Victor and that which took place in medieval guilds for a variety of different professions and crafts. These guilds addressed in a holistic manner the practical, social, spiritual, emotional, economic and political concerns of their members (see Rosser, 2015). In both settings, hierarchy and order were salient and strongly embedded, yet, at the same time, mutual learning and support were also evident.

In the 19th century, John Henry Newman put great weight on the central part played in learning by living in community, and he was convinced that conversations between students outside of class can be expected to contribute significantly to their education and to the development of their thinking and values (Newman, 1912, 146). The company kept by students can have a real impact on whether their learning is integrated, owned and acted upon. Community living can also play an ethical role, exemplifying and promoting courage, self-control, truthfulness, friendliness and an environment of trust. Contemporary concerns for students focus less on fostering example, imitation and moral development and more on providing learning support for individuals, supplying material comforts, sporting facilities and entertainment and suggesting strategies for alleviating anxiety. The emphasis put on service learning, in many universities, goes some way to counter this trend of stepping away from seeking to promote moral development.

The University Today Compared to Hugh’s Educational Outlook

In the university today, there is an emphasis on individual choice rather than prescription in what is studied, how and in what order it is investigated. There is much less emphasis than in Hugh’s abbey or in the medieval university on providing a common educational experience or insisting on a mandatory curriculum that all students should follow. In pedagogy, there is a heavy reliance on technology and fewer face-to-face encounters between faculty and students. The diversity among both faculty and students is much more salient than was the case in Hugh’s abbey or in the medieval universities; this includes with regard to gender, class, race, background, expectations, lifestyles and
aspirations. Georgedes (2006, 93) points out several differences between medieval and modern higher education. She refers to the salience of relativism in the modern university as compared with an assumption that there is an objective truth to be found; a focus on materialism rather than openness to the transcendent; scientific knowledge holds sway as the yardstick by which other forms of knowledge should be judged; neuralgia about religious, particularly Christian claims, is pervasive; learning is usually not based on prescribed texts; there is strong ‘pressure to respond to demands of business and government’ (p. 94) and less emphasis placed on the humanities.

By comparison with medieval teachers and students, and the wider society to which they belonged, today there is a marked lack of moral consensus. The notion of providing a haven from the demands of the world beyond the university – a safe space for self-cultivation and reflection on fundamental questions – rather than a focus on how to address immediate problems facing the world – for many today seems elitist. We witness today the downgrading of the humanities and the hegemony of science and business. The powerful influence of marketing in contemporary universities – with its emphasis on branding, keeping staff on-message, highly conscious of how the university presents itself and protects its public image with regard to potential students, funders, accrediting bodies and the general public – often seems excessive, distorting, incongruous and corrosive of an ethos of free enquiry, radical questioning, independent thinking and creativity. There is a tendency to reduce the ethical dimension of education to compliance with legislation and the protection of human rights, steering clear any substantive attempt at moral formation.

In contrast to the practice at St. Victor – of deep and regular immersion in the thought of a limited number of authors (most notably, Augustine of Hippo), of reaching up to the mind of an exemplar, upon which to model oneself – in modern universities students and their teachers engage with a huge range of authors, but rarely (except in the case of some research studies) in depth and over a protracted period of time, nor in the company of others (other students and colleagues having exercised their individual choice as to topics and sources). The composing of the inner self, as advocated by Hugh, is a strikingly different notion from the constant self-advertising carried out on social media today. The modern self often seems distracted, always being re-assembled, apparently lacking a centre or core or locus of stability or source of coherence. He or she seems concerned with reputation and ‘being liked’ and needing the continuing affirmation and reinforcement of that sense of being accepted and approved of by the virtual community or ‘friends’, if their well-being is not to feel threatened. The only revelation of interest to medieval thinkers was divine revelation, given to us for our salvation, not self-revelation in order to demonstrate our achievements and preferences. In their unself-conscious use of language and in their social interactions, medieval people seem to have been far more oriented towards transcendence and nurturing an awareness of the presence of God than is the case with many men and women, for whom the default position is that faith is a private and optional matter, to be spoken about with great caution in company, lest one appears ‘preachy’ or unduly dogmatic.

In many respects, Hugh’s educational prescriptions differ from those in our own day: his emphasis on memory, on both the moral and the spiritual dimensions of learning,
the role played by divine illumination, the importance attached to the community, the centrality of the notion of restoration, the crucial role played by sacred scripture and the importance of self-knowledge. To these can be added the need for discipline of the body, the powerful influence of example and imitation and the integrative nature of education. Hugh believed that there is an ordering in reality, to which we have to adjust and accommodate ourselves. Such restoration or re-ordering can also be described as a process of conversion, which Hugh considered a necessary step towards, and as a prerequisite for, accessing truth and wisdom. This is in contrast to the notion that a sound use of different disciplinary methods imposes a kind of man-made order on an aspect of reality – an aspect that is not connected to what is disclosed by other disciplines (or, at least, in no obvious way). The fragmentation of the curriculum brought about by a high degree of specialization, leads to a lack of the sense of the whole. Hugh emphasized the importance of a well-ordered and stable foundation on which further study can reliably be built. Today there seems to be little agreement about what is foundational and thus what must constitute a necessary starting point and an appropriate learning pathway for students to follow. In contrast to contemporary higher education, Hugh’s vision was more holistic and integrated, and it stressed formation rather than information. It relied on a much more directed route through the curriculum, rather than one which was individually chosen by students or their teachers. Most obviously different was the Hugh’s assumption, one he shared with most of his peers, that our studies have a salvific significance for us. The process of learning remained incomplete until the content of study was so internalised that it could be lived out in knowledge and love of God and neighbour. By reading and responding to scripture, students would become able to participate in the ongoing story of salvation, which would bring about a restoration of right relationship with God, and thus with the world that God has created.

According to Hugh’s worldview, we can understand the whole history of the world as a linked process in two parts: first, the creation of everything by God; then the gradual ‘winning back’ or restoration of right relationship with God. For Hugh, the human body resembles the physical universe: both come from God, who has established an order which promotes the right conditions of flourishing for all beings; human beings have a privileged role as images of God and stewards of creation but have strayed from that order, disrupting and distorting both themselves and the world around them; they are called, through a properly ordered formation and education, to learn how to read and respond to the world rightly as coming from God and so to restore harmony within themselves and within creation as all are returned to God. Such right reading and then appropriate response rested on two capacities flowing from being made in the image and likeness of God: first, from the image, the capacity to recognize truth; second, from the likeness, the capacity for love and goodness. Human beings are called to serve as priests of creation, mediating between God and creation, their bodies joining them to the material world, their spirits to the heavenly world. Furthermore, Hugh taught that, in order for us to exercise the role given to us by God, each of us has three ‘eyes’: the eye of the flesh, by which we can see the visible world and all the things in it; the eye of reason, by which we can see within ourselves and detect our own nature; the eye of contemplation, by which we come to a vision of God and of everything else in God’s light. Education, within this mind-set, or
horizon of expectation, was intended to train these ‘eyes’ to operate effectively, for the sake of our earthly and supernatural flourishing. Both sacred and secular literature have a positive part to play as constitutive elements in any sound educational programme.

For Hugh, the reading of holy scripture introduces us to the story of what God has done, what his will and purpose for us is, and it has the power to turn us away from our sinful ways and towards God’s mercy and to the path of returning to our true nature and role in creation. Our reading in scripture of the figures who have been touched by God should inspire us to imitate their example. Hugh lived in a world where one’s assumptions and outlook were soaked in biblical imagery, to a degree that is almost impossible for us to recapture. A very high proportion of his writings focussed on the scriptures, either expounding their meaning or teaching his readers how to equip themselves to approach them appropriately. He drew upon the traditional triple pathway into scripture of history, allegory and tropology: learning what has been done in the history of salvation, what should be believed and, in light of these two, how one should live. However, given the lack of salience of these scriptures in the worldview of most people, and the highly secularised nature of contemporary Western society, this aspect of his thought will seem alien and beyond retrieval in most universities.

After referring to different goals for modern universities, such as producing future citizens to contribute to liberal democracies, equip academic disciplinary specialists who can advance the pursuit of new knowledge, or prepare workers to sustain or create wealth in the market economy, Williams makes a case for ‘didascalic Christian humanism’ along lines laid down by Hugh (Williams 2019). This refers to ‘the perennial concern for human and humane knowledge and culture, the integrated formation of students, the comprehensive flourishing of individuals and communities and the worship of the God from whom everyone comes and to whom we return. Central to the notion of didascalic Christian humanism is the training and formation of our intellectual appetites, carefully integrated with the ordering of our moral and spiritual nature. Such Christian humanism – and its relevance for both education and cultural renewal – has been cogently advocated in recent years by Jens Zimmermann (Klassen and Zimmermann, 2006; Zimmermann, 2012, 2017). Apart from wonder at the world and the desire to understand it, our intellectual appetite can be distorted by wrong means of, and motives and goals for, pursuing knowledge (for example, the story of Dr. Faustus). In contrast, in the tradition of didascalic Christian humanism, properly ordered intellectual inquiry adopts a grateful, humble and respectful approach to knowledge and seeks to promote the well-being of all. It frames learning as a way to look after our fellow humans and our world and it draws from and culminates in worship of God, as known in and through Christ, both the source of our being and as the Way, the Truth and the Life. Williams’ advocacy is unlikely to be persuasive outside of faith-based institutions and even there will encounter suspicion and resistance.

A Contemplative Turn?

For Hugh, education is a process of person-building, developing perceptions, affections, habits, skills and virtues that lead to integrity, harmony and beauty. The educated person
becomes capable of, and is fitted for, receiving divine wisdom and his learning is so oriented that it should culminate in contemplative intimacy with God. The acquisition of knowledge, in his view, should lead to wisdom, virtue, self-knowledge and harmony between the inner and outer life of a person. *Memoria, meditatio* and *moralia* were at the centre of his thought. The first two contributed to reforming the intellect, while the third contributed to reforming the will, initially by following discipline imposed externally, and then via the internal development of virtues and affections. I say ‘contributed to’ because the primary agent for Hugh was always the grace of God’s Holy Spirit, working within both our intellect and our will.

There have been attempts in recent years to retrieve some of the insights of a more contemplative, spiritual and wisdom-oriented approach to education, one that is consonant with that proposed by Hugh (e.g. Keator, 2019; Lichtmann, 2005; Powers, 2020, 85–89; Sullivan, 2017, 2018; Summit and Vermeule, 2018). Despite the disparities between Hugh’s educational outlook and modern assumptions, if we appreciate what we are learning properly, according to its real depth and potential significance – what it has to teach us in its own right and from its own nature, not according our needs or uses – it can at the same time reveal to us something important about ourselves and of our place in the world and how we should respond. To come to such an appreciation requires us to foster the capacity to receive the world and others as gift rather than as an opportunity to grasp. This calls for a contemplative stance that informs and grounds our activity. Scientific knowledge and technical application, while valuable and necessary for survival, physical health and material comfort, cannot supply meaning, purpose and value in our lives. These come primarily from our relationships.

At the time of writing this paper, many countries are suffering from the global pandemic COVID-19. This has led to a massive reduction in the frenetic daily cycle of production, consumption, travel and activity. Millions of people are facing, not only an economic and health emergency, but also an unprecedentedly widely enforced time of lockdown, constraint of movement and social isolation in order to prevent the spread of the disease. While it is too soon to know what changes, if any, in individual and social behaviour will emerge when this crisis is over, it is to be hoped that it might prompt, not only a more robust awareness of the need to protect the vulnerable and to devise imaginative innovations in the way we manage our collective lives (for example, in business, manufacturing and education), but also a heightened concern for the common good and the desire to collaborate in mutual support, accompanied by a deeper sense of the need for personal restraint and self-discipline if all are to flourish, and a form of public discourse that is more kind and respectful. In such a context Hugh of St. Victor, despite the many differences between his worldview and that of our own society, still has some salutary lessons from which we can learn.

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