
Medieval Ways Vocational Pedagogy in Dante and Chaucer

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Abstract

In recent years scholars have contended with questions surrounding the fate of higher education in the United States. Under economic duress, now intensified with the COVID-19 pandemic, they have made defenses and charted courses of action to make colleges and universities more viable and valued by various stakeholders across the social and political spectrum. One interesting proposal is a renewal of higher education's role in guiding students in thinking about and reflecting upon their vocations and life trajectories. Scholars like Tim Clydesdale (2015) have implored colleges and universities to invest in vocational exploration programs to help assist students in this critical, life-changing endeavor and to foster students' conceptions of purpose and meaning during their undergraduate experience. In adding to these perspectives, looking to the past can offer incisive and nuanced perspectives on vocational exploration as well. Considerations of medieval vocational thought, particularly as portrayed by Dante and Chaucer, provide fertile ground for students to consider more broadly, and more deeply, the nature of their vocations.

Introduction

In the ongoing conversation concerning the crisis facing the status and viability of higher education in the United States, a crisis now intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, Tim Clydesdale offers a fresh approach. In response to criticisms of higher education involving the

astronomical rise of costs and students' lack of preparation for careers (particularly from liberal arts programs), Clydesdale proposes that American colleges and universities return to what was once one of their central tenets: fostering students' vocations. In *The Purposeful Graduate: Why Colleges Must Talk to Students about Vocation*, Clydesdale explains that in earlier eras, higher education was "marked by a coherent theme of creating a meaningful and engaging life, which lauded public service and contributing to the greater good."¹ In the current crisis, Clydesdale argues that a return to focusing on students' vocation and purpose can revitalize institutions today. Graduates who are afforded the time and space during their undergraduate years to consider and explore their calling in life will be better able to make meaningful contributions in their careers and in public life. As Clydesdale explains, in order "to maintain their autonomy and core structure," colleges and universities need to provide "intentional and systematic assistance to students in identifying talents, clarifying values, and developing the grit that will sustain them on the long path to productive, global citizenship."² By engaging students in questions of vocation, institutions in higher education can serve, once again, an integral role in contributing to students' sense of meaning and well-being, helping, in turn, to alleviate current and persistent critiques levied against them.

The conflict in American higher education between liberal and vocational education has been present for most of its history.³ Today the debate has branched out into a more multi-faceted conception of "vocation" that goes beyond narrow career preparation and into additional realms and responsibilities of students' lives. Clydesdale contends that the "new strategy" he offers is part of a current strand of discourse taking place regarding the crisis afflicting higher education.⁴ Other scholars are examining the role of institutions in helping students explore and understand their sense of personal and professional purpose. Many of these scholars, in line with Clydesdale, consider this unique role of institutions particularly important in this tumultuous and troubled era in higher education. Many of these works have been in response to scholars and other stakeholders who have sounded the alarm concerning higher education's vulnerabilities in public perceptions. In *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa present strong empirical evidence, through standardized tests, surveys, and transcript information, that college students show no marked improvement in academic skills after two years of coursework.⁵ These skills include reasoning, writing, and critical thinking, all skills most people assume are strengthened in college classrooms. These results, naturally, instigated much debate and con-

sternation; if higher education institutions cannot fulfill their primary function, why must they continue to be funded or even exist? Scholars, in response, have offered various proposals aimed at rebuilding institutions' academic responsibilities in light of their perceived feeble performances. Richard Keeling and Richard Hersh, in *We're Losing Our Minds: Rethinking American Higher Education*, also present evidence that institutions are not effectively instilling the academic skills they promise to students.⁶ Keeling and Hersh argue that, to rebuild the academic standing of colleges and universities, institutions need to focus more on robust learning experiences outside of the classroom. A more intentional approach to teaching and learning across campus and through co-curriculum programs is vital, argue Keeling and Hersh, for higher education to fulfill its academic promises and potential. In *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be*, Andrew Delbanco provides a defense of liberal education through its unique ability to ask the questions and provide the space for students to consider what constitutes a meaningful life. Such considerations, according to Delbanco, are critical in a global economy fueled with rapid technological progress.⁷ Using a narrower focus, Alexander W. Astin, Helen S. Astin, and Jennifer A. Lindholm, in *Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students' Inner Lives*, present evidence that students who grew both religiously and spiritually during their undergraduate years also had better, more-enriching experiences academically and socially on their campuses.⁸ With these results, the authors ask if institutions should place more focus on spiritual growth in order to improve outcomes for students in other components of their undergraduate experience.

As Clydesdale notes, his work contributes to this conversation regarding different approaches that institutions can take to revitalize their purposes and methods. As more scholars proposed that institutions place a more intentional focus on engaging students with meaning and purpose within their undergraduate experience, in the classroom, and elsewhere on campus, Clydesdale embarked on a large-scale, mixed-methods study concerning vocation and purpose-based education on religiously-affiliated colleges and universities across the country. The Lilly Endowment Inc. provided funding to 88 institutions to "develop programming that would foster campus conversations about questions of meaning and purpose, and in particular their religious underpinnings, which is the theology of vocation."⁹ Clydesdale and his research team, using a variety of different methodologies, studied 26 of these institutions, ranging from research universities in large cities to small liberal arts colleges in rural areas. The level of religious-affiliation also varied widely: some institutions were religious in name only,

while religious experiences centered student and institutional life on other campuses. Clydesdale finds compelling evidence that these exploration of vocation programs benefited students, faculty, staff, and institutions as a whole. Based on his results, Clydesdale argues that when institutions “meaningfully engage their organizational histories to launch sustained conversations with students about questions of purpose, the result is a rise in overall campus engagement and recalibration of postcollege trajectories that set graduates on journeys of significance and impact.”¹⁰ Even though the study only included religious-affiliated colleges and universities, Clydesdale is sanguine about versions of these exploration of vocation programs at state institutions too. These colleges and universities, even under different guidelines, can “begin with engaging questions, with stories of meaningful journeys by individuals and institutions, and keep theological and spiritual content in descriptive and historical forms.”¹¹ It is this “new strategy” that Clydesdale offers to revitalize higher education.

Clydesdale ultimately documents the positive benefits that accrue for various stakeholders when institutions create and foster exploration of vocation programs in a directed way. These exploration programs, like the participating institutions themselves, varied widely in the manners in which they operated and in the support offered by administrators, faculty members, and staff personnel. To help prompt and encourage students to think about questions of vocation and meaning in their lives, some institutions adopted campus-wide initiatives, such as retreats and offices on campus providing time and space to talk with faculty, staff, and other students. Other institutions focused more on classroom instruction by developing seminar courses specifically focused on questions of vocation and also by encouraging all instructors to incorporate content and inquiries involving meaning and purpose into all courses. Some institutions placed focus on vocation exploration outside of campus through mentored internships and service-learning opportunities. Even with the diversity of these different vocational exploration programs, all ultimately aimed to prompt and encourage students to explore questions of meaning as they began preparing for their lives beyond campus. Students, for the most part, benefited greatly from participation in these programs, particularly in being prompted to identify their own talents and skills and in identifying the needs of others. Many appreciated the time and space, along with acquiring a vocabulary, to reflect on purpose with faculty and staff members who shared stories of their life trajectories in pursuing their own vocations. These vocational exploration programs fostered a sense of community and camaraderie on campus held in common by multiple stakeholders.

Along this line, and perhaps of most interest to those concerned about the economic viability of higher education today, Clydesdale found that these vocational exploration programs “possessed notable retention effects”¹² for students in these participating institutions. He notes that there is “nothing inherently retention-related about purpose exploration,” as “its retention effects lie in its community-building effects.”¹³ Such evidence, though limited, should at least garner the attention of those both inside and outside academia, as student retention plays a major role in the budgetary concerns of colleges and universities.

As Clydesdale admits, providing students this time and space in which to explore questions of meaning and vocation is actually a return to the past, when institutions placed more concerted focus on them. Clydesdale’s argument is that this particular return to the past is crucial as students today are facing a dynamically changing world, with seemingly all-encompassing opportunities and challenges. While Clydesdale recommends this specific return to the past in higher education in the U.S. in recognizing the importance of engaging with the concept of vocation, it is also worth considering if other reflections on vocation in the past can add to the conversation about its importance on college and university campuses today.¹⁴ Can other ideas and frameworks concerning vocation from the past assist students, faculty, staff, administrators, policymakers, and parents in thinking about these issues today? We contend that the predominate culture of the western medieval world, so vastly different than today’s, yet marked by consistent attention on and examination of vocation and its integral role in leading a meaningful life, offers just such a framework.

In particular, two of the greatest poets of this age, Dante and Chaucer, examine questions of vocation and meaning valuable for higher education today. Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* serve as effective lenses through which to view both medieval and contemporary conceptions of vocation. Largely, both poets are thoroughly “medieval” (and Christian) in their portrayals of vocation, so their vibrant and representative depictions are sufficiently divergent from today’s to serve as a fruitful source of comparison of the theoretical and practical differences in conceiving vocation then and now.¹⁵ Despite their orthodoxy, however, the poets are not uncritical of contemporaneous thinking about vocation, nor do they shy away from raising perplexing questions and problems about such thinking. Both their willingness to pry into such issues as well as their success in uncovering significant deficiencies should inspire contemporary scholars both to further investigate contemporary notions of vocation and to consider what medieval insights can be valuable in today’s discussion.

Universal Vocation

In what is likely the most “medieval” aspect of their vocational thinking, Dante and Chaucer indicate that all people have a divinely instituted vocation, and their portrayal of this general call takes the form of a metaphor: in their respective poems, Dante and Chaucer (and the other pilgrims the latter depicts) are travelers on their way. The poets are utilizing both the Christian conception of The Way, who in biblical terms is Jesus Christ, and also the well-established notion (at least as old as Augustine) that this life is a pilgrimage. As Egeus puts it, when consoling his son Theseus in Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale*, “This world nys but a thurghfare ful of wo, / And we been pilgrymes, passynge to and fro.”¹⁶ One’s pilgrimage is not merely to St. Thomas à Becket’s shrine at Canterbury Cathedral, but toward the Heavenly Jerusalem, where Dante ends up at the conclusion of the *Paradiso*. While nonetheless admitting, and intricately describing, the multitudinous byways that people use to stray off the true path, both poets indicate that it is a matter of one’s vocation that one is to be on the Way. That is, one is *called* to be on the Way. And this is not just true of the pilgrim-Dante and the pilgrim-Chaucer, who are the main characters of their respective poems. All people, Dante and Chaucer claim, are called to be on the way.

In the case of the *Divine Comedy*, Dante depicts himself receiving this call. Though often read in excessively allegorical terms (especially in undergraduate classrooms), the character Dante-the-Pilgrim is clearly a specific individual: he is the Florentine poet who was born in 1265 and is now 35 years old, he is the lover who is enthralled with Beatrice, and he is the patriot who is soon to be exiled for the rest of his life. He is a real sinner who has wandered off the path and who is called to return to it. Nevertheless, Dante-the-Pilgrim is also an everyman figure. The opening of the poem suggests as much: Dante-the-Poet begins, “In the middle of the journey of our life, I came to myself in a dark wood, for the straight way was lost.”¹⁷ He is midway on *our* life’s [*nostra vita*] journey. This is the journey to Heaven that all people are on, and, as indicated in the poem’s second canto, it is a pilgrimage that all, like Dante-the-Pilgrim, though perhaps not quite so spectacularly, are called to supernaturally.

In Dante’s specific case, it is a rather exalted chain of command that brings him his marching orders: the Blessed Virgin Mary—St. Lucy—Beatrice—Virgil. The call Dante receives ultimately stems from and leads toward divinity, but this chain of command also reveals that any person’s call to pilgrimage is the result of merely human, natural sources as well. Virgil, and all he represents (poetry, pagan philoso-

phy and learning, natural intellect, etc.), is among the means by which Dante is called. Indeed, Virgil is chosen specifically because Beatrice knows the appeal and authority Virgil holds in Dante's eyes. As depicted in the *Comedy*, one's vocation is a universal, supernatural call that utilizes specific natural means.

Chaucer portrays the nature of the universal calling in the first 18 lines of the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*:

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
 The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
 And bathed every veyne in swich licour
 Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
 Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
 Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
 The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
 Hath in the Ram his half cours yronne,
 And smale foweles maken melodye,
 That slepen al the nyght with open ye
 (So priketh hem Nature in hir corages),
 Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
 And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,
 To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;
 And specially from every shires ende
 Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,
 The hooly blisful martir for to seke,
 That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.¹⁸

These famous lines are full of callings, including calls to the sub-human world. May flowers are being called up by April showers. Crops are being called up by the Spring's West Wind. Mother Nature is calling birds to select their mates. These are all natural, normal, seasonal, unconscious callings. These callings are all *ordinary*—in the sense that they are *ordained*—all are following what one might call the Laws of Nature and Nature's God. And it is no different when Chaucer moves from the "when's"—*whan that Aprill, whan Zephirus*—to the "then" of line 12. That is, it is merely a normal, ordinary, ordained part of life that folk desire to go on pilgrimages—as normal as flowers growing and birds singing. And every calling described up through line 14 is universal: *all* flowers, *all* crops, *all* birds, and *all* humans. *All* are called. But like Dante, Chaucer moves quickly from the universal calling to the specific individuals called. All people desire to go on pilgrimages. Specifically, though, English people (it does not matter who—from any shire—all of them) journey to Becket's shrine at Canterbury. And even more specifically, after the first 18 lines of the General Prologue, Chau-

cer describes that on a specific day in a specific place—Southwark—in a specific building—the Tabard Inn—a specific group of thirty English pilgrims are gathered. Like with Dante, vocation is a universal, supernatural call that is manifested in specific, ordinary ways.

The frames of both poems suggest that each particular person is called on this pilgrimage. All are specifically called to the universal Christian vocation. All share in this vocational status of pilgrim. While the Middle Ages provided a setting in which at least in one sense vocation was universal and inextricably connected to religion, such an adherence to a ubiquitous, transcendental call to vocation does not exist in today's culture. This lack of a universal sense of vocation serves as Clydesdale's impetus for colleges and universities to fill this void. Without this guidance, college students often find themselves aimless, or, as Arum and Roksa say, these students are "adrift" in the transition between college and the real world. Delbanco explains that today "too many colleges are doing too little to help students cope with this sense of uncertainty."¹⁹ In contrast to the Middle Ages, Clydesdale points out that "while living in this postmodern world offers many advantages, a major disadvantage is the fact that it assigns individuals the task of navigating life's purpose amid ever-churning seas of meaning."²⁰ With this lack of a transcendental call for many college students, Clydesdale argues that "universities and their graduates have also flooded the globe with knowledge that, absent purpose, has left many adrift in informational seas and lacking purposeful direction."²¹ Of course, college students can seek out other avenues in which to consider their own vocations, particularly through relationships and conversations with family members and friends, or from larger movements, such as serving various social justice causes. But, as Clydesdale implores, this search can and should be supported and, if needed, initiated by colleges and universities. While globalization and other economic factors are changing traditional life trajectories, along with fundamental changes to family structures and religious practices, the search for vocations for today's college students is far-removed from the medieval world inhabited by Dante and Chaucer. While for most colleges, certainly public ones, there is no going back to the transcendental call for meaning and purpose provided in the western Middle Ages, such a void should probe us to think deeper about from where and from whom young people are called for vocations today. Without this guidance, Clydesdale, with others, fears that they will consistently lead "lives marked by consumerism, civic disengagement, and anomic morality."²²

Particular Vocations

Dante and Chaucer, alongside the universal calling to be a Christian, also indicate that each person has a particular vocation or, more likely, vocations. Both poets themselves lived out various additional vocations. Besides following their Christian call, both obviously lived out their poetic calling as well as several others.

Dante, in his adolescence and early manhood, was a soldier and politician, and he lived out a political calling, even when during the last decades of his life he was exiled from Florence. He continued to serve as a counselor to Florence via letters; he also addressed epistles full of advice to various kings, emperors, and cardinals. During most of his exile, he served in various advisory and ambassadorial roles to the noblemen who served as his patrons. Indeed, his political exile opened up what he conceived as his prophetic calling that is borne out in his epistles, his prose and poetry, and his service to his patrons.

Chaucer, also, lived out various vocations beyond the general call of Christian and the particular call of poet. Like Dante, he was a soldier and heavily involved in political life, holding a number of governmental jobs. He was an esquire of the king's household, an ambassador of the king, the controller of customs, justice of the peace, a member of Parliament, the clerk of the king's work (in charge of building and repair at ten royal residences), and a forest official. Add to these various duties both poets' call to married life and fatherhood, though both are rather reticent about family life, especially Dante, who has so much to say about Beatrice, but nothing about his wife, Gemma.

The characters both poets portray are no different in that they possess various and multiple vocations. Dante fills hell, purgatory, and heaven with poets, philosophers, churchmen—especially popes—husbands and wives, monks and nuns, soldiers, kings, politicians, disciples, and angels. Chaucer, as Dryden famously said, displays “God's plenty,” by which he meant that Chaucer displays the full range of human types, and this includes a wide spectrum of vocations.²³ Many of the pilgrims' callings can be classified within what were contemporaneously known as the “Three Estates”: those who pray, those who fight, and those who dig. For instance, the monk, prioress, friar, and parson are members of the first estate; the knight and his squire the second, and the Plowman representative of the third. But there are plenty of callings that do not easily fit into any of those.²⁴ The emerging merchant class, for instance, including the miller and the guildsmen are not really members of what was traditionally described as the third estate. And the Clerk, seemingly a sort of perpetual student, and no

doubt, as his title indicates, a cleric, may fit better in what we today would call academia rather than the first estate. Regardless of how one classifies each pilgrim's vocation, after finishing the General Prologue one might have a similar perception of the various particular vocations as one does after completing the *Inferno*: it does not look good for many of them. No pilgrim seems to fare well besides the Knight, Parson, and Plowman, and perhaps the Clerk, and plenty of modern criticism has found fault with even the so-called "ideal" figures.

As both poets portray the spectrum of particular vocations held by all in addition to their general Christian pilgrim vocation, the reader is well-situated to ask if any vocation is better than another. Are some vocations more suited to the heavenly pilgrimage? An obvious medieval answer would seem to be the religious vocations. At times, indeed, we use the term "vocation" today in just this sense, as a special calling to be a minister or priest, or monk or nun, devoted to God's service. In the Middle Ages, a vocation of the first estate was undoubtedly seen as a higher calling. In his portrait of the Parson, Chaucer describes the pilgrim's ideal qualities and actions (and contrasts them to what was apparently more typical of actual priests), and he concludes: "if gold ruste, what shal iren do? / For if a preest be foul, on whom we truste, / No wonder is a lewed man to ruste."²⁵ Those called to the "religious life" are of more noble metal than the rest of humanity. Clearly, the religious life is a higher calling. Nonetheless, one does not need to read much of the General Prologue to see that holding a religious vocation does not ensure sanctity—witness the Friar and Monk, for instance. And it seems likely that the Canon, a cleric who comes upon the Pilgrims as they are getting near to Canterbury toward the end of the *Tales*, but who shamefully runs off, is the only one for whom the reader has no hope of his salvation, of his arriving at either Canterbury Cathedral or the Heavenly Jerusalem. Though the expectations are higher for those called to the religious life, Chaucer acknowledges that they can rust, and corruption of the best is the worst.

Dante also privileges religious vocations. In fact, this is most clearly seen as he condemns those who hold them.²⁶ In one of the first poetically fitting punishments he witnesses—that of the avaricious and prodigal clashing against one another—he is amazed by the number of clean-shaven heads he sees, that is, of clergymen. He asks Virgil, "Master, now explain to me what people this is, and if these tonsured ones to our left were all clerics."²⁷ To which Virgil responds, "These were clerics, who have no hairy covering to their heads, and popes and cardinals, in whom avarice does its worst."²⁸ This is one of the few sources of wonder that ceases quickly for Dante, as time and time

again in his descent through hell he meets prominent churchmen. The simonists in the third pocket of the eighth circle of hell are a special point of emphasis for those with a religious vocation, as simony is typically a clerical sin. It is the buying and selling of spiritual things, which could include acts such as charging for sacraments or buying church offices and positions. Among the simonists, Dante gives one of his angriest speeches during Canto 19 of the *Inferno*, in which he condemns Popes Nicholas III, Boniface VIII, and Clement V (the latter two before they are even dead). And this condemning speech is echoed later in Heaven by a blushing St. Peter, and even Beatrice becomes pale upon hearing Peter's words.²⁹ Like Chaucer, Dante nonetheless sees the clerical state as the highest calling. During a conversation with Pope Nicholas III, Dante denounces simonists, claiming that he would "use still heavier words"—how, it is not easy to imagine—but that he is "forbidden by [his] reverence for the highest keys, which [Nicholas] held in happy life."³⁰ A similar meeting occurs on the fifth terrace of Mount Purgatory. Upon meeting the once-avaricious but now-repentant Pope Adrian V there, Dante bows down to him. Adrian commands him to rise, calling him a "fellow-servant" and quoting Matthew 22:30: "When the dead rise again, there is no marrying and giving in marriage; they are as the angels in heaven are."³¹ The notion here is that, likewise, when the dead rise again, there will be no popes, no clergy, no laity. In the afterlife, at least, there will no longer be a vocational hierarchy.

In this life, in which Dante and Chaucer do suggest a vocational hierarchy exists, the vocations and estates other than those who pray are nonetheless afforded dignity. Those not called to the religious life, those who fight and dig, and sell, and build, and teach, and do everything else, they too are instruments for God, though of a different, and baser, metal—iron, not gold. As the Wife of Bath explains in a slightly different context: "For wel ye knowe, a lord in his household, / He nath nat every vessel al of gold; / Somme been of tree, and doon hir lord servyse"³²; in other words, a wide variety of lay vocations are useful and necessary, and all fit within the universal hierarchy of the three estates, all ideally serving the universal Christian vocation. As such, all types of particular vocations are nonetheless susceptible to corruption. All estates and vocations can rust, as we witness the miller, reeve, and shipman of the General Prologue, and as Dante depicts the corruption among poets, soldiers, and kings besides clerics. All that being said, however, one should not lose sight of what was mentioned earlier—that corruption of the best is the worst—so any debasement of a lay vocation will never be as perverse as that of a religious vocation.

Dante and the blessed in heaven show particular disdain for sinful clerics, especially popes.

A hierarchy of particular vocations different than that illustrated by Dante and Chaucer exists today. In fact, it is probably more accurate to say that hierarchies of particular vocations exist, as there is no universal, general vocation that would provide a standard by which to judge the relative merits of particular vocations (as there was in the medieval Christian worldview of Dante and Chaucer). A few different vocational hierarchies appear to be in place for students to consider today. In all likelihood, economics determines the most prevalent contemporary hierarchy. Many students choose a life trajectory devoted to preparing for lucrative careers, often in business or medicine. Such a choice makes financial sense, particularly in an era of economic upheaval and the rising cost of a college education. What might be termed a social justice hierarchy is also prevalent, as students assess the merits of prospective careers, in non-profits, education, and in other service organizations, based on the level of impact they will have on their local and global communities, and, in fact, many may gain more interest due to recent events in the U.S. Though less often considered, a religious hierarchy is still viable for some students, particularly in religious institutions, as they can prepare for different ministerial roles. Of course, based on the aforementioned concerns raised by Clydesdale and others about the lack of value and meaning guidance provided by colleges and universities, we may question how much guidance students receive within their navigation of the different vocational hierarchies. It is important to recognize that these vocational hierarchies are often implicitly chosen by students and/or externally imposed on them, whether by parents or societal pressures to conform to a certain kind of lifestyle. Looking to the past for other considerations of vocational hierarchies, such as through Dante and Chaucer, supports Clydesdale's plea for colleges and universities to offer intentional exploration of vocation programs to make these often implicit decisions more explicit.

Even though the sense of vocation is larger than a person's career path, careers still play a significant role in a person's search for meaning and purpose. Most individuals in the Middle Ages had little agency in choosing a career path: for the most part, males would take up the trade of their fathers, and females would learn the domestic arts from their mothers. The notable exception is religious vocations, which, largely, could be pursued by all (and which may explain Chaucer and Dante's frequent depictions of clerics who are not dispositionally suited to their religious callings). Today, however, college-age students have much more freedom in starting down a career path of their choosing.

As we often tell elementary students, they can be anything they want to be. Concomitant with such seemingly-limitless possibilities is the angst of making these decisions. Today's college students are presented with a plethora of options, and pressures, to choose a career path. Some college students may feel pressure from parents to choose a career path that is well-paying, others may choose a profession that fits their social justice inclinations, others may choose based on a religious calling, while others still may choose a profession that is glorified in television shows and movies. Though restrictive, the medieval conceptions of general and particular vocations were clearly defined and painstakingly defended. At the very least, colleges and universities can do more in providing guidance on career paths that fit students' dispositions and personalities, in particular by encouraging students to identify the possibly-implicit standards by which they are evaluating their future careers, and to acknowledge other standards by which they could so.

Such guidance is critically needed on today's university and college campuses, as examples abound of individuals who pursue career paths because of their financial rewards but are miserable within them. Likewise, we often encounter individuals in careers who do not fit their dispositional qualities. These seemingly endless choices and pressures were not faced by individuals in the Middle Ages, illuminating a critical void that needs to be filled intentionally by colleges and universities. If, as scholars maintain today, colleges and universities need to guide students in considerations of what constitutes an "informed and enriched human life,"³³ then guidance on career-choices, centered on vocational considerations, needs to be offered as well. As these scholars at present warn, the void in purpose exploration education on college campuses potentially creates dire consequences. Without a serious consideration of vocation, meaning, and life trajectories, students may find themselves pursuing careers and ways of life that do not fit their values or skill sets.

Avocations

As suggested above, Dante and Chaucer indicate that all vocations can be corrupted, that, as the Wife of Bath knows, there are various ways of "wandrynge by the weye."³⁴ There are various ways to vacate—to vacation—from one's vocation. What is the cause of such vacations? The easy medieval answer is fallen humanity. But Dante offers an additional answer in the voice of Charles Martel, whom he meets in the Sphere of Venus in heaven. When answering Dante's question about

how good fathers can beget evil sons, Charles comments on the diverse nature of vocations as well as mis-pursued vocations, their avocations. He begins by noting that there could not be citizens if “people d[id] not live differently through different callings.”³⁵ Deducing from this (Aristotelian) principle, he goes on to argue, “your different effects must have different roots: hence one is born Solon, another Xerxes, another Melchisedech, and another the one [Daedalus], who flying through the air lost his son.”³⁶ Nonetheless, Charles laments, in Dante’s day, people “force into religious life a man born to gird on the sword” and “make a king of one who prefers words: therefore your course strays from the path.”³⁷ Charles assumes that a distribution of labor is necessary for a functioning society, with people called to various vocations, such as rulers, priests, and artists. He also assumes that some are forced or persuaded into pursuing calls they are not fit for. Such are more prone to corrupt a legitimate and good calling if it is not truly their calling. What Charles describes still seems frequent for today’s students, particularly when their parents encourage them to pursue fields of study that will yield them lucrative jobs, but jobs that they are not dispositionally suited for. Certainly, there can be dire social ramifications of the young being led to avocations. Dante describes numerous wolves in prominent church positions who jeopardize their flocks because they are not suited to be shepherds. Nonetheless, Dante indicates that pursuing an avocation is not sufficient to merit hell. In the third canto of the *Paradiso*, Dante meets two nuns—Piccarda Donati (Dante’s sister-in-law) and the Empress Constance—both of whom were called to be nuns but later left religious life—more and less willingly. Both, nonetheless, were saved and are now blessed in heaven.

We suspect that some of Chaucer’s pilgrims are not dispositionally suited for their vocations. For instance, neither the Monk nor the Prioress seem fit for a religious vocation. Nonetheless, especially given Chaucer-the-Pilgrim’s live and let live attitude in the General Prologue, it is difficult for us readers to despair of the salvation of either one. The general call of Christian pilgrim (and repentance and God’s mercy), both poets seem to conclude, trumps any particular vocation or avocation. Of course, without such a general call today, many students face much angst in choosing and pursuing different life trajectories and vocations. Today’s decisions on vocations and careers, of course, are nowhere near as final as those in the Middle Ages, as many individuals change careers multiple times. Such decisions today, too, are not often thought to produce the eternal consequences that marked vocational paths in the Middle Ages. Even so, students face much angst and worry in choosing which life trajectories and vocations to pursue,

especially in tumultuous social and economic climates. Mental health concerns are gaining increasing attention on college campuses, as students seem to be struggling, in part, with handling these pressures.

Likewise, once students graduate and enter the “real world,” we can also consider the results of their vocational choices. As mentioned before, examples abound of individuals who are in careers and professions that do not fit their dispositional characteristics³⁸ or their sense of purpose. Many may look back on their college experiences and lament the choices made there that set them on this particular life trajectory. Such examples of unfulfilling and/or poorly-chosen vocations should increase our urgency in guiding students through this thought-process during their college years. This urgency drives Clydesdale’s call for the creation and cultivation of exploration of vocation programs on today’s college and university campuses. In contributing to Clydesdale’s call, we offer that looking to the past, particularly to the Middle Ages, can provide students and other stakeholders on campuses additional, nuanced ways in which to consider and reflect upon these urgent and critical considerations of vocations. Whereas we have focused on the Western Christian Middle Ages, explorations and intersections of other cultures’ conceptions of vocation can also be fruitful. Clydesdale notes from his research that “Coursework was the most direct avenue for introduction of purpose exploration texts” for students to consider.³⁹ Dante and Chaucer, along with poets of other cultures and ages who vibrantly portray vocational issues, have much to say regarding life trajectories and career-choices for today’s undergraduate students, and it is worth considering their reflections on this momentous subject, if only as a means of encouraging students to recognize their own, possibly implicit, conceptions of vocation.

Notes

¹ Tim Clydesdale, *The Purposeful Graduate: Why Colleges Must Talk to Students about Vocation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 25.

² *Ibid.*, xvi.

³ Much has been written concerning this dualism in American higher education, particularly in the early decades of the 20th century. For representative accounts of this debate, see Alexander Meiklejohn’s *The Liberal College* (1920), *Freedom and the College* (1923), and *The Experimental College* (1932), and John Dewey’s *The Problems of Men* (1946).

⁴ Clydesdale, *The Purposeful Graduate*, xvi.

⁵ Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

⁶ Richard P. Keeling and Richard H. Hersh, *We’re Losing Our Minds: Re-thinking American Higher Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

⁷ Andrew Delbanco, *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

⁸ Alexander W. Astin, Helen S. Astin, and Jennifer A. Lindholm, *Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students' Inner Lives* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

⁹ Clydesdale, *The Purposeful Graduate*, 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xvii.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 218.

¹² *Ibid.*, 97.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁴ William C. Placher (ed.), *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2005), 3, 9-10, begins his anthology of texts discussing Christian conceptions of vocation with just such a claim: "One reason to read passages on vocation from the history of Christianity is thus to encounter a range of different options," including those that "challenge present assumptions" and that enable us to "gain richer perspectives on our own time."

¹⁵ Though, as we argue below, the western medieval world was more unified in its conception of vocation than we are today, variance of opinions certainly existed. For a good overview of such thinking, see Section 2 of Placher (ed.), *Callings*.

¹⁶ Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, I.2847-8. All quotations of the *Canterbury Tales* are from Larry D. Benson (ed.), *The Riverside Chaucer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987) and are cited by fragment and line numbers.

¹⁷ Dante, *Inferno*, 1.1-3. Translations of the *Divine Comedy* are Robert M. Durling's: *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri* 3 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996-2011).

¹⁸ Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, I.1-18.

¹⁹ Delbanco, *College*, 148.

²⁰ Clydesdale, *The Purposeful Graduate*, 21.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 172.

²² *Ibid.*, 204.

²³ For a comprehensive examination of the particular vocations depicted in the General Prologue (and Chaucer's criticisms of them), see Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

²⁴ For a discussion of the malleable and permeable boundaries between the three estates in the Tales, see Peggy Ann Knapp, *Chaucer and the Social Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

²⁵ Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, I.500-2.

²⁶ For a clear and detailed examination of Dante's critique of the abuses of religious vocation as well as Dante's conception of his own poetic and prophetic vocation, see Nick Havely, *Dante and the Franciscans: Poverty and the Papacy in the "Commedia"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

²⁷ Dante, *Inferno*, 7.37-39.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.46-48

²⁹ Dante, *Paradiso*, 27.31-66.

³⁰ Dante, *Inferno*, 19.100-3.

³¹ Dante, *Purgatorio*, 19.134-8.

³² Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, III.99-101.

³³ Clydesdale, *The Purposeful Graduate*, 220.

³⁴ Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, I.467.

³⁵ Dante, *Paradiso*, 8.118-9.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.122-6.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.145-8.

³⁸ For an interesting perspective on dispositions and career-choice, see Matthew B. Crawford, *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2009).

³⁹ Clydesdale, *The Purposeful Graduate*, 291.