RETURNING TO THE ESSENTIALS: ETHICS, HUMANISM, AND RESPONSIBILITY IN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

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Abstract: *This article analyzes the importance of studying the humanities in university education and their contribution to the holistic development of students. In a context dominated by technical specialization and the fragmentation of knowledge, it is argued that the humanities play an essential role in fostering critical reflection, ethical sensitivity, and a profound understanding of the human condition. These disciplines enable the connection of technical knowledge with transcendent values that go beyond the limits of specific competencies.*

The subject "Education for Social Responsibility," implemented as part of the humanities program at the Universidad Francisco de Vitoria, is presented as an essential component for the ethical and social development of students. This course introduces students to topics such as human dignity, equality, and solidarity, while exposing them to complex human realities through volunteering and community activities. These experiences allow students to internalize ethical values, foster empathy, and critically reflect on the impact of their professional decisions on society.

This study explores the philosophical foundations of the course on Social Responsibility through the lens of the open reason approach, highlighting its relevance in the holistic education of university students. Based on epistemological, anthropological, ethical, and sense-related foundations, it examines how this subject transcends the transmission of technical knowledge to integrate a broader and more transcendental understanding of the human being and their environment. The concept of open reason, characteristic of the Universidad Francisco de Vitoria, guides this approach by promoting an interdisciplinary dialogue that connects science and the humanities, seeking a synthesis of knowledge oriented toward serving the common good.

The research findings emphasize the importance of linking anthropological and ethical principles with professional praxis, providing students with tools to address complex social issues from a humanistic and supportive perspective. This interdisciplinary approach helps develop professionals capable of integrating transcendental values into their decisions, thereby fostering responsible and sustainable social transformation.

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1. The University as a Space for Holistic Education

University education currently faces complex challenges that demand a profound reevaluation of its objectives and methods. For a long time, universities have leaned toward extreme specialization and the fragmentation of knowledge—a trend that, while enabling significant advancements in various fields, has also created important limitations. The complexity of contemporary issues requires a comprehensive educational approach that fosters the integration of knowledge and the development of transversal skills in students. Holistic and multidisciplinary education emerges as an essential model for preparing future professionals not only to perform in their specific fields but also to address global challenges from a holistic and humanistic perspective.

Holistic education proposes a model that encompasses all dimensions of the individual: intellectual, human, social, emotional, and spiritual. This approach acknowledges that university education should not be limited to the transmission of technical or specialized knowledge but should also shape well-rounded individuals capable of critically reflecting on their role in society and their contribution to the common good.

In the context of a globalized and complex society, universities face the challenge of forming professionals capable of addressing multifaceted problems that transcend the boundaries of traditional disciplines. Within this framework, the integration of humanities courses into university curricula becomes central to building holistic knowledge. This approach not only broadens students' horizons but also provides them with a conceptual and ethical foundation that allows them to understand the interconnection between different areas of knowledge and their impact on society.

The historical trend toward specialization and disciplinary fragmentation has enabled significant advancements in scientific and technical knowledge. However, this same specialization has created a disconnection between disciplines, making it difficult to address global problems in an integrated way. According to Moran (2010), the fragmentation of knowledge limits the capacity of educational institutions

to prepare students to face contemporary challenges, which require an interconnected and multidimensional approach[2].

The humanities, with their focus on critical analysis, ethical reflection, and understanding of the human condition, play an essential role in overcoming these limitations. Integrating humanities subjects into university curricula not only helps reduce the compartmentalization of knowledge but also fosters an interdisciplinary perspective necessary to tackle complex problems.[3]

Science and the humanities, though traditionally considered separate domains, share a common goal: understanding reality and improving human life. Ortega y Gasset argued that excessive specialization could impoverish professionals' global vision, preventing them from understanding the broader impact of their work.[4]

One of the most significant contributions of the humanities to university education is their capacity to foster a solid ethical foundation. Universities are not only tasked with forming technicians and specialists but also responsible citizens who understand the implications of their actions on the social fabric. Education should be a space where students confront fundamental questions about goodness, justice, and collective responsibility.

The humanities also remind students that beyond data and theories, science and technology are deeply human endeavors. As Morin states, "education should promote a general intelligence capable of addressing complexity, context, multidimensionality, and interaction."

The search for meaning is an essential aspect of human existence, and higher education should facilitate this reflection in students. The integration of humanities subjects in universities helps students connect their technical knowledge with the great existential questions, promoting a deeper and more enriching vision of their professional work.

The mission of the university, since its origins in the Middle Ages, has been to serve as a space for the synthesis of knowledge. Although scientific and technical progress has led to the creation of highly specialized disciplines, it is imperative that universities continue to promote an

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[2] Joe Moran, *Interdisciplinarity*. Routledge, London, 2010, p. 230.

[3] Arendt, Hannah, *Between Past and Future*. Penguin Books, New York, 1968, pp. 65-67.

[4] Ortega y Gasset, *La Misión de la Universidad*, ediciones Cátedra, 2015, p. 122.

approach that integrates different areas of knowledge rather than perpetuating their isolation. As Dewey points out, meaningful learning arises from the interaction between different fields of knowledge, enabling students to understand their environment in an integrated way[5].

Universities, as spaces for critical reflection and knowledge creation, have the responsibility to overcome disciplinary fragmentation and foster an education that integrates different perspectives. This approach not only prepares students to address present challenges but also equips them to contribute to building a fairer and more sustainable future. By integrating the humanities into university education, progress is made toward an educational model that values both technical rigor and ethical and cultural depth, responding to the needs of an interconnected and complex society[6].

2. Transforming Education: Solidarity and Social Commitment in Teaching Practice

In a global context characterized by significant inequalities and complex challenges, solidarity and social commitment emerge as essential principles for building fairer, more inclusive, and sustainable societies. Within this framework, universities play a leading role as spaces for academic and professional training that transcend technical fields to become catalysts for social transformation. These institutions must not only prepare students in their respective disciplines but also instill ethical and social values that encourage active and conscious participation in improving collective well-being.

As centers of academic and cultural exchange, universities have the capacity and responsibility to foster a mindset oriented toward solidarity, valuing diversity as an enriching element and promoting inclusion at all levels. This approach not only positively impacts the internal dynamics of the university community but also prepares students to take on meaningful roles in society.

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[5] Victoria Baraldi, "John Dewey: la educación como proceso de reconstrucción de experiencias", revista de la escuela de ciencias de la educación, año 17, nro. 16, vol, Universidad Nacional del Litoral de Argentina, 2020, p. 74.

[6] Celia Pineda; Alejandra Pedraza e Iván Darío, "Efectividad de las estrategias de retención universitaria: la función del docente", Revista Educación y educadores, volumen 14, nº 1, 2011, p. 125.

Promoting solidarity and social commitment within universities requires a comprehensive approach that encompasses the three core missions of higher education: teaching, research, and community engagement. In teaching, it is essential to include curricular content that addresses issues related to social justice, ethics, and global citizenship. The implementation of specific courses, interdisciplinary projects, and community service-based learning methodologies can be an effective strategy to connect theoretical knowledge with practical application.

At the Universidad Francisco de Vitoria (UFV), students are trained to reflect on the ultimate purposes of their professions and their integration into professional and social environments. Consequently, the UFV curriculum design includes a strong integration of humanities-based courses, strategically distributed throughout all academic years. This approach aims to provide students with a deep and consistent humanistic education that complements their academic development. By the end of their studies, students will have completed courses such as Introduction to University Studies, History and Philosophy of Science, Anthropology, Education for Social Responsibility, Ethics and Bioethics, and Introduction to Theology.

This educational approach aims to ensure that students not only acquire excellent scientific competencies but also develop a deep reflection on the ultimate dimensions of their future professional roles and their impact on society. Beyond equipping them with a pre-defined path, students are invited to question and explore the profound existential questions that will inevitably accompany their personal and professional journeys. This prepares professionals who, in addition to excelling in their fields, possess a solid humanistic foundation that allows them to address reality from a broader perspective, integrating technical aspects with ethical and social understanding.

Throughout their studies, regardless of their degree programs, students take humanities courses carefully distributed across each academic year. These courses are not conceived as isolated complements but as a fundamental part of the educational process, where scientific learning is interwoven with humanistic reflection. This approach enables students to internalize, from the early years of their education, a synthesis of scientific knowledge and values that help them situate themselves in their social context with greater responsibility and critical awareness.

The course "Education for Social Responsibility" is part of the humanities program offered to all second-year students at the Universidad Francisco de Vitoria. This 6-credit course seeks to plant the seeds of intellectual and moral virtues, as described by Aristotle in the second book of his Nicomachean Ethics. By cultivating intellectual virtues, the course aims to train students in practical, assessable areas. Additionally, it fosters moral virtue by confronting students with human realities that awaken social awareness through the experience of others' suffering and the personal experience of solidarity via social volunteering[7].

This course is structured into three main dimensions, coherently integrating theoretical, practical, and formative aspects to promote comprehensive education. From a theoretical perspective, students are introduced to reflections on the ultimate causes and principles of human dignity, questioning the origin and purpose of individuals in relation to others. This broadens their perspective on global issues such as inequality, poverty, and injustice, encouraging personal and social responsibility to contribute to change. The practical dimension involves 50 annual hours of volunteer work in collaboration with institutions and NGOs, addressing issues such as disability, immigration, drug addiction, and gender violence. Social responsibility education must focus on the discovery of others, based on the conviction that humans are relational beings, allowing students to engage in life projects aimed at societal well-being—not through theoretical instruction but through guided experiences that enable personal discovery[8]. Finally, mentors provide personalized support, helping students meaningfully integrate theoretical and practical experiences into their academic and personal development.

3. Philosophical Foundations of Social Responsibility Education through Open Reason

Open reason is one of the defining traits of the Universidad Francisco de Vitoria, requiring an approach to teaching and research rooted in dialogue with philosophy and a constant quest for the unity of knowledge. This approach is firmly anchored in anthropological, epistemological, ethical,

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[7] Aristóteles, *Ética a Nicómaco*, Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 2014, pp. 320-332.

[8] Alfonso López Quintas, *Llamados al encuentro. Fuente inagotable de alegría,* serie fragmentos, 2011, p. 99.

and sense-related principles that transcend the methods of each discipline, going beyond technical expertise.

It is essential that students, in addition to becoming excellent professionals, learn to focus on realities beyond their specialties—including social responsibility—and understand their importance and transcendence. "If the teacher fails to communicate, to make the subject matter meaningful and engaging, enabling the student to discover themselves through the subject, then their teaching will degenerate into meaningless abstraction, into tedious and terrible aridity[9]."

To work from the perspective of "Open Reason," the Universidad Francisco de Vitoria structures intellectual work—study, teaching, and research—around four essential questions: epistemological, anthropological, ethical, and those of ultimate meaning.

Starting from this framework, the university does not merely train good professionals but also human beings committed to reality and willing to make an effort to understand the "why" and "for what" of their professional endeavors.

Since its founding, this university has committed itself to ensuring that its students receive a comprehensive humanistic education as part of the curriculum, regardless of their chosen fields of study. Comprehensive education involves not only providing the technical and theoretical knowledge specific to each discipline but also equipping students with "a broad cultural foundation, the ability to express their own ideas and relate to others, as well as a vision of humanity, society, and their future work that enriches them as individuals and helps them exercise their future professions in accordance with authentic human and Christian values[10]."

From this perspective, the foundational questions guiding the course are: Does reality exist, and can it be known? These questions are addressed with epistemological responses. Next, we ask: What is the human being? What is their essential composition? This addresses the anthropological question. Equipped with anthropological and epistemological insights, we then ask: Do these responses compel me to act in a particular way? Am I

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[9] María Lacalle, *En busca de la unidad del saber*, Universidad Francisco de Vitoria, Madrid, 2014, p. 7.

[10] Universidad Francisco de Vitoria, *La Misión de la Universidad Francisco de Vitoria: Nuestra misión hoy*, Madrid, 2010, p.2.

free to embrace or reject this commitment? Finally, we ask: Why and for what ultimate purpose do I take on this commitment? In this way, the course is grounded from ethical and meaning-oriented perspectives.

These questions are not new but have often been excluded from universities, which have, in many cases, become transmitters of technical knowledge rather than true wisdom. Since the 16th century, Western thought has provided insufficient answers to these questions. The horror and emptiness that marked Western culture in the 20th century—the so-called "crisis of modernity's culture"—highlight the urgency of responding to the anthropological, epistemological, ethical, and meaning-related foundations that safeguard human dignity and prevent the repetition of grave historical errors.

The history of humanity in modern times has been marked by unprecedented technological development, alongside serious irresponsibility, lack of solidarity, and self-destructive capacities with planetary implications. While humans have achieved significant scientific and technological milestones, they must ensure that these advances connect with strong philosophical and theological foundations that can be applied in daily professional life.

Thus, the course on Social Responsibility culminates a path initiated in the anthropology course, connecting students in experimental sciences with realities beyond the material scope of their disciplines through a transdisciplinary approach. This approach allows them to understand the ultimate purposes of their professions through a new framework centered on human beings, their inherent dignity, and their transcendence.

3.1. Principles for Education in Social Responsibility: An Integral Perspective

Social responsibility seeks to ensure that individuals do not remain indifferent to social problems. While Spain leads in terms of solidarity levels among its population, some authors attribute this solidarity to fleeting traits, such as emotional responses, raising concerns that it may not yield long-term effects.

Starting from the premise that social responsibility must be based on solid principles rather than fleeting emotions, the foundation of the course should reside in the conception of the human being as a social entity that needs to coexist with others for full personal fulfillment. This interaction with others is neither accidental nor occasional; it is an integral part of the

human process of evolution and development. Fundamentally, humans can be characterized as authentic beings of encounter.

Secondly, it is important to analyze the meaning of the word "responsibility," whose etymology comes from "respond." Is this response an instinctive reaction of the human being, and therefore morally neutral, or does it generate a genuine moral duty—a true obligation? The answer to this question is irrelevant for the purposes of teaching, as it is the students who must provide their own answers. As educators, our role is to open students' hearts, connect them with the realities of the suffering "other," and allow their own values and acquired training to shape their responses. It is imperative that we guide university students in considering and answering these questions in light of their values and their human and personal possibilities, helping them grow in freedom and a sense of responsibility[11].

Another distinctive feature of the course "Education for Social Responsibility" is the pursuit of truth through personal experience. This is not about instilling theories that are later tested in social practices. Rather, social practices themselves are the source of reality, of authentic experiential truth lived firsthand, with theory serving to contextualize—but not to explain—it. In this sense, we speak of genuine experiential truth: life encountering what is real.

However, experience is just the first step in a process of search and reflection in light of truth. Experience must be analyzed and contextualized to uncover its meaning, significance, and implications. Why do I dedicate myself to others and strive for a better world?

To conclude this reflection, the course on Social Responsibility is absolutely essential within our university's educational program because it crystallizes the core principles of the Universidad Francisco de Vitoria, namely:

The principle of formative integration, which aims for a humanistic education naturally integrated into all study plans to shape people, not just technicians. This seeks a "formation that integrates the whole person in a

[11] Yolanda Guerra; Adriana Mórtigo y Norma Berdugo, "Formación integral, importancia de formar pensado en todas las dimensiones del ser, Revista Educación y Desarrollo Social Vol 8, nº 1, Bogota, 2013, p.57.

synthesis of the heart, enabling the lived experience of learning through an encounter with truth[12]."

The intellectual-university principle, which transforms a practical formative experience into a genuine focus of intellectual reflection and research around the subject matter.

The humanistic principle, which seeks to integrate scientific subjects with a solid philosophical and theological foundation. In this course, this principle encourages future scientists to deeply reflect on good and evil and on the philosophical underpinnings of human solidarity.

The principle of expanded reason, which seeks fruitful dialogue between scientific realities and the world of Christian faith, reconciled in the common truth—the truth of love that does not impose but, stripped of arrogance, becomes a testimony of life.

3.1.1. Epistemological Foundations of Social Responsibility

Underlying the epistemological foundation is a conception of truth and one of the most fascinating problems of epistemology. Unfortunately, this issue has highly relevant, persistent, and current practical repercussions, making it important to examine the epistemological premises upon which we base our understanding. The epistemological question addresses the nature of reality and its relationship to the subject. Ultimately, can humans know reality, and is that reality objective? This relationship between truth and reality—can we trust our senses, or do they distort what we perceive?—has been present since Plato's famous metaphor of the cave and continues to accompany humanity to this day[13].

Ander-Egg argued that the question cannot be approached from a reductionist perspective, as such a fragmented view condemns us to impoverishment. Instead, these reflections must be approached interdisciplinarity[14]. The world is too complex for restricted and limited answers. The drive to know and understand is intrinsically human, and humans have always been concerned with both their interiority and the

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[12] Carmen de La Calle, et al., *La asignatura de Responsabilidad Social en la Universidad Francisco de Vitoria*, Madrid, Universidad Francisco de Vitoria, 2014, p. 20.

[13] Carlos Roser Martínez, *Platón, la república. Libro VI y VI*I. Dialogo, 2009, pp. 120-132.

[14] Ezequil Ander-Egg, *Interdisciplinariedad en educación*, Buenos Aires, Editorial Magisterio del Río de la Plata, 1994, p.56.

external natural world. Reality is complex and multifaceted, requiring different discourses, approaches, and methods to understand it. Given the complexity of the object under observation, any discipline that seeks to offer an exhaustive and monopolizing response is doomed to failure. Humility is essential for this endeavor, consisting of recognizing the magnitude of the task and acknowledging that no single discipline can claim a preeminent role in this undertaking.

All disciplines contribute, from their particular perspectives, to explaining reality. In the words of Freire, "The relationship between humans and the world is plural and diverse, and to the extent that humans respond to the wide variety of challenges and do not exhaust themselves in a standardized type of response, we come closer to strengthening ties with truth[15]."

Despite these limitations and the valuable contributions of all scientific disciplines to understanding nature, it is important to recognize that philosophical knowledge aims at reality understood in all its dimensions. Scientific disciplines, in contrast, are limited to observable reality. Consequently, philosophical knowledge complements and greatly expands our understanding of realities beyond the reach of scientific knowledge due to the limitations of its method.

This realization may initially seem paradoxical, given that science has contributed incredible advancements to human knowledge, especially in the past two centuries. Astonishing discoveries have been made in biotechnology, biomedicine, supercomputing, and information technologies. This ascending path was charted by figures like Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo and reinforced by the rationalist philosophy that proposed a new scientific paradigm divorcing the humanities from the sciences, as they were understood in Aristotelian frameworks. Experimental sciences were quickly enthroned at the expense of non-empirically demonstrable realities. Modernity ultimately displaced speculative sciences from the domain of truth—now transformed into scientific truth—disregarding reason as a tool for understanding reality.

The philosopher Descartes laid the groundwork for separating philosophy from its earlier role as an observer of reality. His statement, "I think, therefore I am," shifted reality toward the interiority of the observer,

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[15] Paulo Freire, *Educación y cambio*, Buenos Aires, Comisión Ecuménica Latinoamericana de Educación, 1976, p.27.

the subject. From that moment on, philosophy became relegated to the perception of reality as held by each individual observer. Subjectivism placed the subject at the center as an observing entity, and reality became only that which each subject apprehends. This broke the relationship between truth and reality. There was no longer a single truth but as many truths as there were individuals who experience, think, and measure. The result was a profound degradation of philosophical knowledge. Ultimately, positivism and the elevation of scientific knowledge to an unrestrained level erected a wall between the sciences of evidence and any other unobservable reality, which had previously been the domain of philosophical and speculative disciplines[16].

This separation between science and philosophy becomes a serious moral issue, as philosophy and ethics served as boundaries for scientific knowledge. These disciplines also provide profound insights into the question of human dignity. Speculative sciences caution against the morality of certain methods and the goals of experimental sciences. Unbound by any ethical limits, scientific knowledge can pose significant threats to the planet, human dignity, and society. For these reasons, we believe it is essential to emphasize the importance and value of these disciplines.

We are fully aware of the challenge of reclaiming extra-scientific realities in the postmodern world. The epistemological revolution initiated by Descartes gave rise to various philosophical movements—relativism, skepticism, pessimism, nihilism—that have transformed the worldview of reality and humanity. These movements share the exclusion of spiritual or metaphysical realities that cannot be explained, analyzed, or empirically demonstrated. "If it is not observable, it is not scientific," they argue. Or: "If it is not observable, one explanation is as valid as its opposite." Once intangible realities—such as the soul, God, or goodness—were exiled from the realm of the knowable, epistemological materialism took over. Its logical extension was to apply these premises to morality, where the individual frees themselves from any moral constraints, placing themselves beyond good and evil. Thus, the "superman" is born, who paradoxically

[16] Maite Iglesias y Pilar Giménez, *Conversaciones inter-ciencias: Biotecnología y Humanidades*, Comares, Madrid, 2021, p. 81.

abandons any attempt to understand the ultimate foundations of the human being and the world they inhabit.

During modernity, science sought to provide humanity with the absolute truths that had just been abolished. The scientific method enables the evaluation, approach, and resolution of specific questions within its parameters and rules of operation. The empirical demonstration of any reality produces an incontestable scientific truth. Unfortunately, many phenomena—the most important ones—cannot be answered or validated using this method.

Against the certainty of science, modernity offers the relativism of uncertainty, rejecting the deepest truths of human reality that do not fit its framework.

The course *Social Responsibility* begins with the affirmation of reality and the possibility of knowing it. Through anthropology, the course examines the truth of the human being and seeks answers to fundamental questions about first principles, the meaning of life, and human nature. The course has a dual purpose: first, to enhance students' reflection to help them find a purpose in life; and second, to provide a fundamental framework for understanding human life, allowing students to grasp the limits of scientific research and development through bioethics.

We believe that humans can know not only material reality through the senses but also intangible realities that must be personally experienced and internalized to be understood. From this perspective, the university's mission is to serve Truth, creating a space of freedom in service to the individual and the common good. These realities must guide and permeate all courses offered.

Students must reflect on and deeply understand the anthropological premises of the 21st century, recognizing the major milestones that have shaped the contemporary world. From *cogito ergo sum* to Nietzsche's vitalism—the "undertaker of philosophy"—there has been a shift away from a transcendent view of the world. It is urgent for students to internalize the consequences of these milestones and understand the evolution that elevated scientific thought as the sole absolute truth. They must also comprehend how these movements laid the groundwork for relativism and other trends that sever science from moral constraints, leading to catastrophic consequences for humanity in the 20th century and the cultural crisis of modernity.

Educators must internalize these experiences to not only transmit essential knowledge but also to serve as living testimonies. If I am a tireless seeker of truth, I can convey my restlessness and passion to my students. Beyond syllabi and practical exercises, we can teach through our being.

Our challenge is to ensure that, through a theoretical framework and social practices combined with classroom example, students internalize that reason and faith are not incompatible realities. Instead, they can interact and together provide more comprehensive answers to the mystery of life. Only in this way can scientists become great humanists.

3.1.2. Anthropological Foundations

The course Social Responsibility is the practicum of the Anthropology course, which serves as its foundation and prerequisite. Its grounding, therefore, stems from this discipline. In Anthropology, a subject also taught in the second year across all degree programs, the ontological question about the human being ("Who is man?") is addressed. This is a fundamental premise for later tackling existential and purpose-related issues.

Social responsibility finds its anthropological foundation in the dignity of the human being, as well as in empathy and solidarity. Contrary to approaches to social responsibility framed in transactional or utilitarian terms—such as image, altruism, or fleeting trends—we emphasize the social and moral dimension of the human being. Socialization begins within the family, is refined throughout formative years, and culminates in maturity, enabling individuals to construct and enact their life projects with freedom and autonomy. From this perspective, the educational process is not simply about imparting knowledge to students but also about instilling values that guide them in building their identity and life plans.

If we conceptually define human nature, we can affirm that humans are living beings endowed with sensory faculties enabling them to satisfy their biological functions of survival, nutrition, and reproduction. These sensory faculties are interconnected with corporeality, linking humans to other living beings.

Humans, however, are more than living beings—they are rational beings and moral beings because they possess the capacity to do good or evil and exercise free will. This means humans can discern the morality of their actions and act accordingly, turning their deeds into moral actions. A human being is composed not only of matter but also of consciousness and

soul, and these extracorporeal realities cannot be cloned or replicated by any machine, no matter how sophisticated.

Furthermore, humans are understood as "beings of encounter" due to their unique relational dimension. This relational nature manifests on two levels: First, as social beings, humans develop interpersonal relationships from birth until death[17]. From this relational perspective, the anthropological foundation is based on a view of humans as inherently social and free beings, each unique in their dignity.

Lastly, our anthropological conception is grounded in the duality of the human being, consisting of body and soul, intelligence and will. The course on *Social Responsibility* moves from the body to the soul.

In recent decades, we've also learned that intelligence is not monolithic; it intertwines with passions, feelings, and affections, giving rise to different "intelligences" and, especially, reflections on emotional intelligence—a concept Aristotle already discussed in his *Nicomachean Ethics* in the 4th century B.C. In addition to these intelligences, humans possess self-awareness. They intuit that they are more than just a body, though the body is their most immediate evidence. From this point arises a sort of dual awareness, enabling humans to perceive something indefinable beyond the corporeal, with which they interact.

Particularly in social volunteering, students embark on their journey by physically engaging in a project. From this giving of oneself arises moral reflection. Just as most scientific disciplines appeal to students' intelligence, this course also appeals to their empathy, solidarity, and dedication to others.

It is crucial for students to discern the anthropological model underlying any ideological, social, political, or cultural manifestation so they can apply this anthropological understanding to any scientific project in their field. "Anthropological neutrality" does not exist; in today's society, different conceptions of humanity coexist and sometimes clash. Students must recognize that not all anthropological conceptions are grounded in reality or aimed at promoting good. Every reality carries an implicit

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[17] Juan Jesús Álvarez, *Fundamento y el porqué de la responsabilidad social*, coordinado por Carmen de la Calle Maldonado y Pilar Giménez Armentia, Universidad Francisco de Vitoria, Madrid, 2016, p. 9.

anthropological model—whether in the music we listen to, the advertisements we see, the art we admire, or the news we consume. It is worthwhile to analyze these models in class to identify the one that truly reflects human reality.

Finally, it is necessary to anchor the image of humanity within students' specific scientific disciplines. They must be aware of the anthropological model underlying their science and reflect on its validity. The ultimate goal of these inquiries into humanity is to apply these notions to their own existence, transitioning from the general to the particular. Once we understand what it means to be human, we can understand who *I* am. Equipped with this "manual," the student can embark on the adventure of their own life.

3.1.3. Ethical Foundations

At the beginning of the course's foundation, we suggested that the first two questions—regarding anthropology and epistemology—serve as axiomatic premises that provide the keys to framing the approach to everyday praxis. Indeed, if we base our understanding on a specific existential anthropology that sees humans as more than mere matter, coupled with an epistemology that affirms the possibility of knowing truth, the next question arises: How can humans freely choose truth, goodness, and what is morally right—or, conversely, disregard the morally correct option?

As we have seen with the preceding questions, every subject contains an implicit or explicit stance on the ethical question. This is because the issue of good touches almost every aspect of our lives: when we consider the consequences of what we teach and research, when we evaluate situations, things, or people, or when we assess the cultural and social repercussions of our specific work as university professors. Above all, it relates to the means we use to achieve certain ends and the legitimacy of those means, regardless of the excellence of the ends pursued.

When we address the ethical question, it can be expressed in many ways, such as: What is the purpose, the "why," the risks, and the consequences of what we do, research, or teach? What consequences will a specific technique, methodology, or perspective on the human being and reality have? Are my actions and specific behaviors good? Do they make me a better person?

Ethics pertains to morally correct behavior (or behavior aligned with human nature). Questions about truth and the human being are intertwined with the question of good. This becomes evident when we reflect on how to act in different circumstances and on how to do good through teaching and research.

During the anthropological foundation, we rejected the reductionist equation of humans with animals as insufficient. As Ortega y Gasset observed, "Humans, more than by what they are or what they have, transcend the zoological scale through what they do, through their behavior. Hence, they must always watch over themselves. This is what I wanted to suggest in the phrase—which may seem like just a phrase—that we do not live to think, but we think to subsist or survive[18]." This unique aspect of humans—thought—reveals, through introspection, their own existence, which, as Ortega noted, is something given to them, something they encounter and are compelled to sustain through decision-making. "When we are born, or after birth, we must, whether we like it or not, start swimming," Ortega says[19]. Sartre echoes this sentiment in a more pessimistic but equally radical way: "Man is condemned to be free." In both cases, the inescapability of human freedom and the necessity to take sides, to decide, and to choose are presented as essential traits of our nature. Starting from this unavoidable need for radically free action, ethics asks how this faculty can be used to do good and avoid evil.

If freedom cannot be suspended and humans cannot renounce it, it is essential to understand how to properly use this unique and distinctive faculty. The answer lies in ethics: Humans must act in accordance with their nature, directing their will toward achieving legitimate ends and aligning their behavior with the higher faculties of intelligence and will. Setting goals and objectives is part of the question of purpose, but once those ends are selected, their goodness must be evaluated—that is, their conformity with human nature and their alignment, more or less evidently, with our ultimate purpose: the pursuit of happiness.

This boundary—the limit of human dignity—applies not only to ends but also to the means. To achieve harmony between the goodness of ends and the legitimacy of the instrumental means used to achieve them, virtues are essential, understood as "habits of good choice."

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[18] José Ortega y Gasset, *El hombre y la gente*, Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 1996, p. 98.
[19] *Ibid*, p.112.

Human action, ultimately, is composed of values—which underscores the importance of education—but also of personal experiences, as the internalization of values has a significant experiential component. It is essential for humans to be filled with values that guide their behavior (learned through intelligence and reason), but it is equally important to put these values into practice through willpower and habitual exercise. This is the role of virtues: "Neither ethics nor education can be sustained solely on values. They must focus on virtues, as well as on norms. Virtues are fundamental to ethics and education, although they are not sufficient on their own"[20].

In this domain—the exercise of virtues—the course Education for Social Responsibility complements anthropological knowledge by combining it with practical learning. The course appeals not only to reason but also to instilling values through the pedagogy of pain and practicing virtues through experiential engagement.

We believe that students' ethical development can indeed be taught and that this course provides an ideal forum for students to organically and naturally engage with profound questions. While foundational anthropology asks students to explore the philosophical principles of human existence, seeking causes and origins, this course takes the reverse path—moving from problems to answers.

Beyond classical learning, some realities must be practiced and experienced. From this perspective, learning occurs through action and contact with other human realities. Inevitably, confronting pain and injustice—poverty, marginalization, illness—will impact students, raising profound questions: Is the world just? Why hunger, misery, wars, refugees, and those in need? Can I do anything to alleviate these realities? Is it worth it? Is my contribution meaningful? What methods are valid, and which should be discarded in the pursuit of social justice?

If every ethical action is based on and guided by a specific vision of the human being, here we will work with people, for and alongside them, to address realities such as injustice, suffering, and solidarity. While we previously appealed to reason and intelligence to internalize a set of concepts, this part focuses on emotion and feelings as tools for experiential

[20] Ramiro Pellitero, *Ética y educación de las virtudes*, en Almudi.org, 2015.

learning and the internalization of realities that cannot be fully assimilated through study but rather through practice.

In addition to the ethical foundation of the human being directed ad intra (toward their own behavior), we cannot overlook their social needs. As discussed in the anthropological foundation, humans are inherently social beings. To lead a full life, they must establish relationships with others and create organizational structures that allow them to develop this dimension of their personhood. These organizational structures, inherently human, must themselves be imbued with ethics.

Just as humans have a nature and autonomy that allow them to set goals, the social body also has its own constitution and pursues its own objectives. To achieve these, societies rely on agreements where individuals relinquish certain rights for the sake of the common good. In this redistribution of rights and responsibilities between society and individuals, various organizational responses—democratic, authoritarian, theocratic—have emerged over time, adapting their sense and proposals. Not all social organizations respect individuals or the common good.

These reflections are particularly relevant in democratic societies, where participation in political structures is both a right and an obligation. It is therefore essential to verify whether these structures enable the development of individuality and contribute to the realization of individuals' vital aspirations. The functioning of social structures also integrates a specific ethics and is oriented toward specific goals. In this sense, society and political structures must be directed toward the common good, and it is an urgent task to define—or at least outline—what our conception of the common good entails.

Modernity, as we have explained, relegated speculative sciences to the subjective realm and elevated scientific knowledge to a dominant position, beginning with its exclusionary dualisms. Similarly, this dialectical process pitted public against private, adding a pseudo-theological and totalizing discourse, prioritizing social interests over individual ones, and generating ideologies that subordinated the individual to notions of class or race. It is essential to reclaim the dialogical nature of the human being to understand their intrinsic dignity, which prevents subordination to any political project. The university plays a crucial role in this effort to value the individual, encouraging them to develop professional knowledge while reminding them that such knowledge must serve the common good. It also helps students recognize their fundamental role within this framework.

The course Education for Social Responsibility aims, from this perspective, to help students step out of their everyday realities and imbue their professional knowledge with meaning, pushing them further to question the limits of their professional actions. Students must clearly distinguish between ends and means and verify whether all paths to achieving a legitimate end are possible, desirable, or should be discarded for not aligning with anthropological and epistemological principles. However, confrontation alone is not enough. When moral principles meet social realities, the responses can vary widely: experiences of social injustice often lead to revolutionary attitudes or political doctrines that demand absolute submission of the individual to the imperatives of the collective. Students in experimental sciences must complement their search for professional answers with a quest for spiritual answers, maintaining the hope and confidence that these realities can be addressed and understood, and that this knowledge, distinct from scientific knowledge, satisfies the human yearning for transcendence and morality.

It is crucial that, along this learning journey, students are left alone with their conscience, their experience, and all these reflections. Without personal reflection, we will never reach the moral question. This reflection must guide action, and this action must be steered by values or principles—principles that, while not demonstrable, can be evidenced and serve as guidelines for behavior. These principles accompany actions, guiding them through the choice of legitimate means and discarding those that do not align with human nature[21].

The issue of the common good cannot be approached as merely the sum of the private goods of all individuals or through collectivist doctrines that sacrifice individuals' legitimate aspirations to the collective. The pursuit of the common good must be an aspiration of society and of all individuals within it. Starting from the social dimension of the human being, the common good is not a formula or an aggregate—a sum of individual aspirations—but must transcend quantitative criteria to seek the greater good for the largest number of people. We understand the common good as a moral principle that must guide policymakers in prioritizing strategies and in selecting political objectives to pursue at a given time. Neither do we see the common good as a market logic that self-regulates to find

[21] Jean Piaget, *El juicio moral en el niño*, editorial Beltran, Madrid, 1935, p. 333.

equilibrium on its own. An appropriate combination of individual freedom and autonomy with social policies forms the foundation of this principle.

Regarding the principle of solidarity, it is understood as a moral principle that allows us to overcome individualism and connect with others as beings in need and in suffering. This principle, a cornerstone of social responsibility, is based on the relational nature of human beings and results in an individual commitment to humanity, grounded in ethical and moral principles. As Pope Francis said, "Let us acknowledge that while we have grown in many aspects, we have also become illiterate in accompanying, caring for, and supporting the most fragile and weak members of our developed societies. We have become accustomed to looking the other way, walking past, ignoring situations until they hit us directly[22]".

The principle of subsidiarity establishes the primacy of the individual over society. "I am a man, and nothing human is alien to me," said Publio Terence. Unamuno amended this: "I am human, and I deem no other human strange to me." This is not a matter of nuance but a radical correction made in 1913, when the great totalitarian regimes of the 20th century were simmering in Germany and Russia. These ideologies would trample millions of human beings, with names and identities, in favor of abstract notions of humanity based on race or class. With Unamuno, we dismantle the pedestal of "humanity" and radically uphold the primacy of the person over any social abstraction, committing ourselves to improving their situation from our positions of responsibility. By embracing this radical commitment to the human being, the Universidad Francisco de Vitoria lays the first cornerstone of its educational project.

The final principle underlying social responsibility is the universal destination of goods. If the principle of subsidiarity set the limits for totalitarianism that sacrifices the individual for the collective, the principle of the universal destination of goods establishes a boundary for unchecked capitalism, which assumes that goods have no moral purpose and that individuals cannot be constrained by any social structure.

3.1.4. The Question of Meaning

The question of meaning frames the significance of action within the horizon of existence. In other words, meaning gives direction, momentum,

[22] Francisco, *Fratelli Tutti: Sobre la fraternidad y la amistad social,* Ciudad del Vaticano, 2020.

and purpose to human actions. I can act in accordance with anthropological and epistemological premises; I can act rightly and in harmony with nature. But in the end, I must answer the question of meaning: Why and for what purpose do I do what I do?

Viktor Frankl, a psychologist and survivor of Nazi concentration camps, drew on Nietzsche's phrase: "He who has a why to live can bear almost any how". He identified the existential vacuum as the central crisis of 20th-century humanity, a void faced by the world when it cannot find an explanation for its existence[23]. To discover this path, Frankl suggests three possible avenues: first, the awareness and acceptance of responsibility to find meaning in one's life; second, the exploration of human love; and finally, the path of suffering. Value, he says, "does not reside in suffering itself but in our attitude toward suffering, in our willingness to endure it"[24].

Frankl speaks from his traumatic experience in a concentration camp, primarily addressing the experience of personal pain as a learning path. In contrast, C.S. Lewis argues that it is through the pain of others that we can transcend our own. Reflecting on the grief caused by the loss of his beloved, Lewis feels remorse: how can he focus on his own pain at her absence rather than on the absence itself? Lewis reminds us that through the suffering of others, we can also begin to give meaning to existence[25].

We speak of pain as the paradigm of absolute mystery: injustice, illness, suffering, and ultimately, death. These are realities that can be studied, but they also require another approach: experience. From this perspective, love and pain can be seen as pedagogical realities: the suffering of others and the student's own engagement through volunteering, fused into a profound learning experience. "There is a world, the sensory world, born of hunger, and another world, the ideal, born of love," said Unamuno, as he pondered the ultimate purpose of knowledge. For him, knowledge for its own sake seemed utterly inhuman; he insisted on seeking the ultimate purpose of thinking: And all this, for what? he asked, concluding that the goal of knowledge is to serve humanity, to sustain and perfect human society, which is composed of individuals, rejecting abstract ideals in favor of tangible realities. This ultimate foundation of knowledge, wisdom, and

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[23] Victor Frankl, *El hombre en busca de sentido,* Herder, Barcelona, 1979, p. 38.

[24] *Ibid*, p. 40.

[25] Clive Staples Lewis, *Una pena en observación*, Anagrama, Barcelona, 1994, p. 52.

the course on social responsibility could not be more aligned. But now we ask: And all this, why?

In response to this need to give meaning to existence, modernity often offers absurdity, nihilistic existentialism, and fragmented answers. Just as the previous section addressed the radical demand for human freedom, the question of meaning is an unavoidable one, appealing to every human being as an individual. One single question, yet billions of possible answers—one for each individual. Yet it is the question, shared by all, that matters because we know the answer will not be explicitly provided.

The answer may be deferred indefinitely, rooted in a perpetual present, as hedonistic theories propose, or in agnostic or stoic acceptance. At this juncture, theology and philosophy come to our aid. While the "doing" involved in volunteer hours is not initially a moral act—it is an academically imposed obligation—mentorships aim to transform this "doing" into a first-order moral experience.

It is crucial to identify the experiences that activate an individual's freedom, pushing them toward action and, therefore, confronting and compelling them to act within the mechanism of freedom-action-desire[26]. These questions are constantly materialized in the course on social responsibility.

Indeed, one cannot be happy without giving meaning to what they do. It is impossible to be happy without imbuing life with meaning. Aristotle already asserted that happiness is closely tied to the search for meaning and that humans cannot be happy if this search does not include the essence of what they are (intelligence, will, emotion, and spirituality).

The question of meaning does not offer a single answer. It is an analogous question, calling for and implying different levels of response. The most significant level, without a doubt, is when the question directly challenges the individual. One single question, yet billions of possible answers—one for each individual. Yet it is the question, shared by all, that matters because we know the answer will not be explicitly provided.

It is important to remember that the question of meaning is personal and may provoke contradictory responses within the university community. The questions and answers belong to the individual. They are neither

[26] Salvador, Antuñano, et al., *El sentido busca al hombre*, Editorial Universidad Francisco de Vitoria, Madrid, 2014, p. 32.

negotiable nor debatable because only the individual must answer to their conscience for their personal search.

4. Conclusions

University education must face today's challenges with an approach that transcends technical specialization, aiming to shape well-rounded professionals capable of addressing complex issues from an interdisciplinary and ethical perspective. For years, the fragmentation of knowledge has enabled significant technical advancements but has limited universities' ability to prepare students for addressing global problems requiring holistic solutions[27]. This article proposes an educational model centered on integral formation, encompassing all dimensions of the human being: intellectual, social, and emotional.

A fundamental aspect of this vision is the integration of humanities into university curricula. These disciplines not only broaden students' ethical and cultural horizons but also connect them to essential questions about the human condition and the impact of their professions on the common good. Humanities help overcome disciplinary fragmentation, fostering critical thinking and the ability to integrate diverse knowledge to respond to global issues. This approach recognizes that both science and the humanities aim to understand reality and improve human life, and thus must dialogue and complement one another.

In this context, the importance of the course *Education for Social Responsibility* in fostering students' social commitment has been highlighted. This course, therefore, is not merely a complement to technical education but an essential component for preparing students to face the challenges of the modern world from an ethical, supportive, and humanistic perspective. This analysis underscores the need to systematically integrate humanities and courses like social responsibility into university curricula to develop well-rounded professionals committed to collective well-being and building a better future.

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[27] Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivando la humanidad: una defensa clásica de la reforma en la educación liberal*. Cambridge, Massachusetts y Londres: Harvard University Press. 1997, p. 240.

To ensure the robustness of this course, a thorough analysis has been conducted from the perspective of *open reason*. This approach has allowed for an examination of the epistemological, anthropological, ethical, and existential foundations that underpin the subject.

In conclusion, universities have the responsibility to educate professionals who excel not only in their technical fields but also in their awareness of their role in building a fairer and more supportive world. Achieving this goal requires an educational model that values both scientific rigor and ethical depth, promoting the integration of science and humanities, ethical reflection, and social commitment. Only in this way can universities fulfill their historic mission as spaces for the synthesis of knowledge and service to the common good, preparing students to confront the challenges of the future.

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