

Mercy and the Catholic Intellectual Tradition Symposium
Salve Regina University
Spring 2015

The Mercy Vector:
Contagious Transformation in Higher Education
Dr. Joel Z. Schmidt

In the U.S. today, higher education is in many ways searching for direction; hardly a day goes by without a news article illustrating how another facet of higher education is fraught with uncertainty, in need of radical revisioning, or perhaps even destined to disappear. While many of the challenges facing higher education are technical in nature, others are related to values in the sense of providing criteria by which to prioritize and choose between competing goals and goods. It is in relation to such goals that established traditions of ethical reflection, including the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, have something of value to offer higher education today. As a result, for the topic of this paper I would like to triangulate mercy, the Catholic Intellectual Tradition (or CIT), and Catholic higher education. Reflecting on this fecund intersection responds both to the stated question orienting this year's Mission Integration grants (i.e., how Mercy and the Catholic Intellectual Tradition are interrelated), as well as some of the sub-topics suggested in the original call for papers (including "Mercy and the Catholic Intellectual Tradition in Higher Education," and "Mercy, Faith and Reason"). Moreover, placing mercy at the heart of the CIT naturally has implications not only for this intellectual tradition on an abstract level, but also on a practical level for the Catholic colleges and universities that are a major site of development of the CIT in our time. And if one important aspect of the CIT is the engagement with current issues starting from Christian symbols and convictions, then by thinking about what form Catholic higher education should take, this paper should itself be viewed as an exercise of the CIT. In that sense this essay is a performative exploration of the role of mercy and the CIT, in the relation to Catholic higher education. As such, the overarching point of this paper will be that mercy has the capacity to function as a "vector" for Catholic higher education today in at least three ways, related to both the physical and biological definitions of the word. First, in relation to the physical definition of the word, mercy functions as a vector by providing an orienting direction for the functioning of post-secondary education. Second, in so doing, it also functions as a vector in the biological sense by transmitting values that can have potentially destabilizing effects on its host institutions; mercy provokes radical questions in relation to the institutional organization of our universities, and even some of the disciplinary assumptions informing the subjects taught in them. Third, in light of the thoroughgoing implications of orienting higher education around the merciful solicitude for other's suffering we are left to grapple with the final aspect of mercy as a vector (i.e., magnitude), in the form of a question: how much faith do we actually have in mercy, what are we willing to wager on it, how willing are we to entrust ourselves to it?

To begin, it is important to describe briefly what I mean when I refer to “the Catholic Intellectual Tradition” (or, CIT). Framing the issue in this way causes us right away to run into difficulties, because in a very real sense there is no such thing as *the* CIT, but rather a variety of traditions all too different degrees claiming the title “Catholic.” So for the purposes of this essay I simply want to highlight the notion that those who self-identify as participants in the ongoing development of a CIT thereby indicate something about the starting point of their intellectual reflections. And if it is true (as I tend to think) that reason itself merely operates upon one’s fundamental presuppositions, which reason cannot provide for itself, then one’s choice of a starting point is very significant indeed.¹ From this perspective participants in the CIT can be identified by the fact that (in some manner the parameters of which themselves are the subject of controversy) they find in the resources of the Catholic tradition something worth thinking about, something that provokes their thought and in its core presuppositions gives it a particular trajectory.

What, then, is the impact of starting one’s reflections on the CIT with mercy? A first step toward responding to this question can begin by more clearly identifying what we mean by “mercy” and Walter Kasper’s recent book on this topic is helpful in this regard. When we first reflect upon the meaning of “mercy” we are likely initially to consider its connection to forgiveness. Indeed, this is the sense of the definition for mercy provided in the dictionary (“compassion or forgiveness shown towards an enemy or offender in one’s power”),² and is the meaning we evoke when we use such phrases as a person being “at the mercy of” someone else. In his book on mercy, however, Walter Kasper draws our attention to some important additional layers of the meaning, by way of an etymological analysis of the word in Latin. In Latin the word for mercy is *misericors*, which “according to its original literal sense, means to have one’s heart (*cor*) with the poor (*miseri*) or to have a heart for the poor.”³ In this sense mercy “names an attitude that transcends one’s own egoism and...has its heart not with itself, but rather with others, especially the poor and the needy of every kind.”⁴ It is ultimately “existence on behalf of others,”⁵ “a matter of attentiveness and sensitivity to the concrete needs we encounter...of overcoming the focus on ourselves that makes us deaf and blind to the physical and spiritual needs of others.”⁶ In the sense that God’s existence is always *ex-istence*, a being with and for others, mercy is “the fundamental attribute of God,”⁷ “the organizing center

¹ Isaac Asimov explored this theme in his aptly titled short story “Reason,” which sums up the central point as follows: “You can prove anything you want by coldly logical reason – if you pick the proper postulates.” A more developed academic exploration that includes attention to this same point may be found in Alasdair McIntyre’s *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*.

² Judy Pearsall, ed., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, Tenth Ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 891.

³ Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*, trans. William Madges (New York: Paulist Press, 2013), 21.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

of God's attributes."⁸ Moreover, inasmuch as the spiritual life consists of reflecting the reality of God in one's own life (or being "imitators of God" in the language of Ephesians 5:1), existence as a disciple of a God fundamentally characterized by mercy means that one's own life must likewise be understood to mean "being for others, or being pro-existence."⁹

Thus defined "mercy" naturally has a practical orientation, and this can have the effect of correcting the unhelpfully speculative tendencies of the CIT fostered by how the dialogue between "faith and reason" has often been understood. In traditional Christian form, the encounter between faith and reason is often construed in terms of showing the reasonableness of faith (e.g., proofs for the existence of God), or the difference between what can be understood of God by reason or "general revelation" (the God of the philosophers), versus what must apprehended via "special revelation" (the God of Jesus Christ). This approach, however, has at least two unfortunate effects. First, it places the emphasis on the speculative level, which has the tendency to depict faith as assent to certain propositions, whereas faith is rather first and foremost a way of being, a way of living in the world.¹⁰ Second, the conflict between the different objects of faith in the traditional framing of "faith and reason" leads to a further confrontation on the level of method, namely between propositions that can be proved using generally accepted evidential procedures, versus propositions that must simply be believed. This places "faith" at a double disadvantage, linked both to its apparent irrelevancy to life (as an abstract speculative discourse) and its lack of a reliable epistemic foundation: what difference does it make to the conduct of one's own life or the amelioration of others' whether or not one affirms certain speculative religious propositions (e.g., the Triune nature of God), and how could a reasonable person reasonably assent to them in the absence of reliable evidence?

In contrast, placing the mercy at the center of the CIT appropriately indicates that in our contemporary intellectual context it is certain *values* (rather than speculative dogmatic propositions) that reason needs, cannot provide for itself, and that constitute the locus of a leap of faith that in fact most people make all the time without realizing it. Some of the key points from the recent book *The Atheist's Guide to Reality* by Dr. Alex Rosenberg (chair of the philosophy department at Duke University) can help us to appreciate how the "faith and reason" dialogue of today first and foremost takes place on the front between knowledge and values. In this book Rosenberg gives powerful expression to the dominant intellectual trajectory

⁸ Ibid., 89.

⁹ Ibid., 151.

¹⁰ The biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan has engaged this issue in relation to the meaning of the phrase "the Kingdom of God" that forms the center of Jesus' preaching in the New Testament. Although this is commonly and popularly considered to refer to "heaven" as an afterlife destination, Crossan takes pains to instead indicate how, in Jesus' use of this term, it rather refers to "a process much more than a place, a way of life much more than a location," "a life-style under God's direct dominion." John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1994), 62, 65. Writing about Catholic Social Teaching, J. Milburn Thompson has summarized this point as follows: "Christianity is intended to be a philosophy of life, a way of living." J. Milburn Thompson, *Introducing Catholic Social Thought* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), 38.

since the Enlightenment of reducing “reason” to instrumental/empirical reason,¹¹ for example when he writes that:

the methods of science are the only reliable ways to secure knowledge of anything; that science’s description of the world is correct in its fundamentals; and that when “complete,” what science tells us will not be surprisingly different from what it tells us today.¹²

Such a thoroughgoing commitment to the empirical method has a profound impact upon the realm of values. Purely as a matter of empirical observation, in Rosenberg’s view it is certainly true that the vast majority of human beings (within the range of 2 standard deviations) tend to exhibit behaviors that one could describe as belonging to the same core morality. Rosenberg identifies this core morality to include such principles as “Don’t cause gratuitous pain to a newborn baby, especially your own,” and “It’s wrong to punish the innocent.”¹³ However, from the outset an empirical approach precludes arguing from the objective *fact* of a widely-shared core morality, to the *moral claim* that this core morality is somehow “right.” No, the reason why the majority of human beings endorse the same core morality can be determined using the same method that is used to generate anything that counts as knowledge, namely the scientific method. From this perspective the appearance of a shared core morality is the result of evolutionary adaptation:

As with selection for everything else, the environment was filtering our variations in core morality that did not enhance hominin reproductive success well enough to survive as parts of core morality...Among competing core moralities, it was the one that somehow came closest to maximizing the fitness of our ancestors over a long enough period that it became almost universal.¹⁴

Consequently, a perspective resolutely based on reason alone (which today is substantially equivalent to empiricism) requires one to let go of any notion that our moral core is right, true, or correct: there is instead only “the core morality that evolution has inflicted on us.”¹⁵ Viewing the situation otherwise is simply an example of a category mistake: from an empirical perspective there is no “should” or “ought,” there is only what “is.” Rosenberg is firm and consistent on this point: “*We have to give up correctness.* We have to accept that core morality was selected for, but we have to give up the idea that core morality is true in any sense.”¹⁶ “Scientism can’t avoid nihilism,” and “Nihilism denies that there is anything at all that is good in

¹¹ This transformation has been noted by a variety of authors including Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and Bernard Lonergan in his *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*.

¹² Alex Rosenberg, *The Atheist’s Guide to Reality: Enjoying Life Without Illusions* (NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 2011), 6.

¹³ Ibid., 104.

¹⁴ Ibid., 108.

¹⁵ Ibid., 144.

¹⁶ Ibid., 113.

itself or, for that matter, bad in itself.”¹⁷ As a result, “Real moral disputes can be ended in lots of ways: by voting, by decree, by fatigue of the disputants, by the force of example that changes social mores. But they can never really be resolved by finding the correct answers. There are none.”¹⁸

Although we may view Rosenberg’s proposal to give up any sense of correctness as extreme, his analysis of the problem of the origin of values is widely shared. As Thomas Nagel (University Professor at New York University) has commented, “among the scientists and philosophers who do express views about the natural order as a whole, reductive materialism is widely assumed to be the only serious possibility.”¹⁹ One unfortunate consequence of making the scientific method coterminous with one’s worldview is that there remains no space for viewing moral judgments as being true or false in any strong sense.²⁰ As the analysis of Rosenberg and others have convincingly argued, we cannot “objectively prove” any moral value to be good or true: in relation to the domain of knowledge, the most we can do is prove that behaviors associated with this value are the result of natural selection that, for the present time at least, has given human beings a certain pro-social orientation.

Thus, faith inheres in the step from such an objective description of “what is,” to any value judgment of how one “ought” to live.²¹ When faced with this realization one option is to eschew any faith whatsoever and accept Rosenberg’s proposal of a thoroughly empirical approach to reality, embracing the nihilism that is its necessary concomitant. However, to live a human life entirely devoid of values, meaning, or purpose surrenders too much of what most people consider valuable and worthwhile in leading a full human life. If these experiences cannot be objectively validated using scientific procedures and so must fall into some other category than that of “knowledge,” then perhaps we live more of our lives than we ever imagined based upon and in the domain of “faith.” In fact, by affirming such things as love, goodness, consciousness, and free will the vast majority of people already base a great deal of their lives on faith, *believing* that such subjective experiences are not merely hallucinations or misleading epiphenomena but rather that they actually disclose some aspect of reality, a proposition that likely in principle exceeds what an empirical approach can demonstrate.²² If

¹⁷ Ibid., 98.

¹⁸ Ibid., 96.

¹⁹ Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012): 4. See likewise his comment that “The conflict between scientific naturalism and various forms of antireductionism is a staple of recent philosophy” (13).

²⁰ Ibid., 28.

²¹ This is an observation many people have arrived at, through various means, e.g., Paul Ricoeur in analyzing the thought of Karl Mannheim, including “Mannheim’s paradox,” in his work *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, ed. George H. Taylor (New York: Colombia University Press, 1986), 159-180. Or one can think of Immanuel Kant distinguishing the question “What can I know?” from those of “What must I do?” and “What may I hope for?”

²² For a recent review of the empirical impossibility of directly studying something as central to human experience as emotion, see the popular but well-researched article by Julie Beck, “Hard Feelings: Science’s Struggle to Define Emotions,” accessed March 12, 2015 from <http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2015/02/hard-feelings-sciences-struggle-to-define-emotions/385711/>. For a similar review of empiricism’s similar failings vis-à-vis consciousness, see Oliver Burkeman’s “Why Can’t the World’s Greatest Minds Solve the Mystery of Consciousness?,”

the dialogue between faith and reason has always been a core activating impulse of the CIT, then centering the CIT today on the value of mercy represents: (1) an apt recognition that a salient and pressing front of engagement between faith and reason in our contemporary context exists on the border between empirical knowledge and ethical values; and (2) the beginnings of a helpful response (if not a solution) to it.

If the foregoing has dealt in some depth with the question of the impact upon the CIT of placing mercy at its center, what of the third term to be triangulated in this essay: what impact might the foregoing have upon Catholic higher education? In short, just as mercy provides the CIT with a certain direction and set of priorities, so too mercy can operate as a vector in Catholic higher education by orienting it toward the end of reducing undesirable suffering. This orientation opposes the temptation for academic study (similar to historic temptations of the CIT!) to move in the direction suggested by several common understandings of the very term “academic,” e.g., as a near synonym for abstract, non-useful knowledge; or as an adjective denoting a fruitless (i.e., “academic”) distinction; or the privileged retreat away from real-world difficulties and problems to “the ivory tower” of academia. In contrast, mercy provides academic study with another vector. In mathematical language a vector is a quantity having direction as well as magnitude: an example would be the velocity of a car, consisting of its travel at a certain speed in a certain direction. In relation to the directional aspect of this definition, placing mercy at the center of post-secondary education creates a practical and even activist agenda for academic study by orienting it toward the compassionate engagement with others’ suffering. I personally was inspired to encounter an approach to higher education inflected by mercy in the campus interviews for my current position in the Religious and Theological Studies Department at Salve Regina University, an institution founded by the Sisters of Mercy. In those interviews the pedagogical impact of the focus on mercy was described to me in the following manner: mercy is understood to be the goal orienting courses in every discipline at the university. I was told that whether one is studying psychology, or biology, or finance, or religious studies, each of these academic programs are ultimately informed by and oriented toward mercy. This might be evident in how service learning is incorporated into a class (e.g., marketing students helping a local NGO promote its services), or a service trip to Nicaragua, or it might be reflected in the particular perspectives introduced into the teaching itself (e.g., relating biological concepts to important contemporary environmental issues). In whatever form it might take, therefore, I clearly received the message that the university’s Mercy mission introduced an applied, practical, and even activist orientation to post-secondary education: not simply knowledge for knowledge’s sake, but rather knowledge mobilized in the service of “seek[ing] wisdom and promot[ing] universal justice.”²³ From this perspective inviting students to embrace the value of mercy is the most significant “faith commitment” a Catholic

accessed March 12, 2015 from http://www.theguardian.com/science/2015/jan/21/-sp-why-cant-worlds-greatest-minds-solve-mystery-consciousness?CMP=share_btn_link.

²³ This is part of the wording of Salve Regina University’s mission statement. Accessed November 14, 2014 from: <https://www.salve.edu/about/mission-statement>.

university can encourage its students to make. In relation to mercy as a vector, it is precisely because technical domains cannot offer orienting moral values for themselves that joining faith-based values such as mercy with technical knowledge, in whatever sphere, is absolutely essential for anyone who does not wish to embrace a thoroughgoing nihilism. If on a theoretical level we do not yet have a fully coherent account of how to integrate faith in the realm of value with the demands of purely empirical methodologies, we are not alone: no one has. On the practical level, however, it is enough to recognize that, as a Catholic institution fundamentally rooted in the value of mercy; supplementing empirical knowledge with a commitment to this value is the most radical sense in which mercy can function as a vector for Catholic higher education. Moreover, and although there is not the space in this paper to explore this in greater depth, with respect to the question of faith in God the experience of living out the value of mercy can itself be a powerful sacramental experience of Godself. If “mercy is the externally visible and effectively active aspect of the essence of God,”²⁴ then acting mercifully in this life is not merely a dutiful response to a deontological necessity. It is rather already a participation in the life of God, which in a Catholic understanding is the ultimate nature of grace itself.

Up to this point I have focused on the ways that mercy can function as a vector in Catholic higher education in relation to the meaning of this term in physics (i.e., by giving academic study a particular orientation or trajectory). However, mercy can also function as a vector in a second way, related to the biological definition of this word. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, in biological usage a vector is “an organism that transmits a disease or parasite from one animal or plant to another.”²⁵ Mercy functions as a vector in this sense both with respect to the transmission of its particular content (what the vector smuggles in), and also the process of smuggling itself (i.e., the subversive and potentially destabilizing effects of the vector’s action).

The way in which Jesus spoke of the Reign of God in the New Testament consistently illustrates this second way in which mercy functions as a vector, one apt example of which is the well-known parable of the mustard seed:

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches. (Mt 13:31-32)

When we think of this parable we are mostly likely to be struck by the juxtaposition of very small beginnings with improbably big endings; this impression is reinforced if we do a bit of biological research, and discover that the mustard seeds Jesus was likely referring to are of the variety *brassica negra*, which are approximately 1 mm in diameter, and yet can grow into

²⁴ Kasper, *Mercy*, 88.

²⁵ Judy Pearsall, ed., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, Tenth Ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 1588.

shrubs that are up to 6.5-10 feet tall.²⁶ However, considering historical information adds a further layer of meaning, one more in line with the vector analogy I am seeking to draw here. The Roman author Pliny the Elder, for example, who was born in 23 C.E., wrote of mustard that “when it has once been sown it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it, as the seed when it falls germinates at once.”²⁷ In his exegesis of the mustard seed parable, the historical biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan expands upon this basic insight by commenting that even when one plants domesticated versions of the mustard plant “there is an ever-present danger that it will destroy the garden.” Moreover, he observes that the birds sheltered in the mustard shrubs trees would hardly have been charming to ancient farmers, since they represented a “permanent danger” to the farmers’ seed and grain. Thus, Crossan argues that the point of the mustard seed parable is not only, or perhaps even primarily, that the mustard plant starts as a very small seed and grows into a rather large shrub. Rather, the point is that mustard seed

tends to take over where it is not wanted, that it tends to get out of control, and that it tends to attract birds within cultivated areas, where they are not particularly desired. And that, said Jesus, was what the Kingdom was like. Like a pungent shrub with dangerous takeover properties. Something you would want only in small and carefully controlled doses – if you could control it.²⁸

In the quality of mustard as “a pungent shrub with dangerous takeover properties” lies the element of similarity to the subversive and potentially destabilizing effects of a vector’s action, and given the subject of this parable, therefore also of the Reign of God, characterized by mercy.

How could this be so? In what sense could mercy, that most kind and gentle of virtues, ever be aggressive, subversive, or threatening? Simply, if we make mercy the center of our post-secondary educational missions in the sense suggested by the Latin word *misericors* (as having one’s heart with the poor), this will not only have the effect of directing our institutions, but also subverting certain of their established practices; mercy will not merely orient disciplinary research and teaching, but challenge some of their fundamental assumptions. This is so simply as a result of the radical disparities in quality of life that exist between rich and poor in our world, the contrasts between which can hardly be overdrawn. On the one hand, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that about “805 million people of the 7.3 billion people in the world, or one in nine, were suffering from chronic undernourishment in

²⁶ Support for the statement that most biblical scholars have identified the mustard seed Jesus referred to as the “black mustard” variety (*brassica nigra*) can be found in Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2008), 220. This plant variety originated in the Middle East, and in Jesus’ time was cultivated for its oil as well as for culinary purposes. For biological information see Snodgrass, and also <http://eol.org/pages/583895/overview> (accessed November 18, 2014).

²⁷ Quoted in John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995), 72.

²⁸ John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, 72.

2012-2014.”²⁹ The British medical journal *The Lancet* has estimated this means that more than 3 million children died of undernutrition in 2011.³⁰ Such experiences of deprivation force impossible decisions: “You are short of food for all or part of the year, often eating only one meal per day, sometimes having to choose between stilling your child’s hunger or your own, and sometimes being able to do neither.”³¹ Consequently, to be poor often also means to experience “a degrading state of powerlessness”: “You have a pervading sense of shame and failure because you cannot provide for your children. Your poverty traps you, and you lose hope of ever escaping from a life of hard work for which, at the end, you will have nothing to show beyond bare survival.”³² In contrast, on the “have” side of the great divide, today there are about a billion people living at a standard of living previously unknown except in the courts of kings and nobles from centuries ago. As a result, it is well within the financial resources of the world’s “haves” to save the lives of many of the “have nots”: reviewing a range of programs and interventions, the Princeton ethicist Peter Singer has estimated that the cost of saving a life through international development aid ranges from \$200-\$2000 dollars.³³

Working from within a utilitarian ethical framework Singer has argued that if we take seriously the principle of the equality of human rights, and therefore also the equality of human suffering, these radical disparities demand of the wealthy that they cut back on unnecessary spending and donate the savings to relieve others’ suffering until they would be sacrificing something nearly as important as a child’s life.³⁴ A Catholic ethic framework – by appealing to such principles of Catholic Social Teaching as the dignity of the human person, the preferential option for the poor, the common good, and the universal destination of goods – comes to similar conclusions. As the Johannine communities in the early church poignantly expressed it: “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?” (1 Jn 3:16-17).

What, concretely, does it mean for Catholic higher education to take seriously others’ death and sickness due to easily preventable factors, vis-à-vis the allocation of our material resources to ease their suffering and death up to the point that we are not sacrificing anything “nearly as important”? The implications are so radical and numerous as to be profoundly disturbing. For example, a focus on mercy would cast spending on the physical facilities of universities in an entirely different light: can spending on beautifying a building, or adding better recreational facilities, really be justified as something “nearly as important” as the lives of the dozens (and

²⁹ From the page titled “2015 World Hunger and Poverty Facts and Statistics,” from the World Hunger Education Service. Accessed March 13, 2015 from:

<http://www.worldhunger.org/articles/Learn/world%20hunger%20facts%202002.htm>.

³⁰ Ruth Alexander, “Does a child die of hunger every 10 seconds?,” *BBC News*, 17 June 2013. Accessed March 13, 2015 from: <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-22935692>.

³¹ Peter Singer, *The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty* (NY: Random House, 2009), 5.

³² *Ibid.*, 6.

³³ *Ibid.*, 103.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

even hundreds) of people who could be saved if that money were otherwise allocated? This question is worth posing since the United States is reported to have the world's wealthiest postsecondary education system, "with average spending of around \$19,000 per student compared with \$8,400 across other developed countries."³⁵ Moreover, since 1998 there has been marked change in the spending of American higher education, whether public or private and from community colleges to the elite Ivies, in that a declining share of their budgets is spent on instruction and relatively more is spent on administration and recreational facilities for students. This "country-clubization of the American university"³⁶ contributes to increases in student tuitions at these institutions, and thus represents a challenge to mercy both within the global context, as well as in relation to the best interests of the student populations universities claim to put first. The large and rising levels of debt with which students graduate from college present them with a serious financial burden,³⁷ so increasing tuition costs cannot have students' best interests at heart. It is not within the purpose of this essay to provide detailed alternative models for our higher educational institutions, though I believe such models do exist.³⁸ It is, rather, enough simply to indicate how, as a subversive and subverting vector, mercy radically challenges the institutional integrity (in both senses of the word) of our universities in their current configuration.

A commitment to mercy will also challenge the assumptions of individual academic disciplines, and suggest fruitful directions for re-orientation. Areas of study related to economics and business face particular challenges in this regard, committed as they generally are to the assumption that the invisible hand of the market "beautifully harnesses the energy of selfish individuals thinking only of themselves."³⁹ On a factual level the principle of rational self-interest and the other anthropological assumptions concentrated in the figure *homo economicus* are being empirically tested in the relatively young field of behavioral economics, and are often found to be unsupported by the evidence.⁴⁰ However, from the perspective of a

³⁵ Sam Dillon, "Share of College Spending for Recreation Is Rising," *New York Times*, July 9, 2010. Accessed November 10, 2014 from http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/10/education/10education.html?_r=0.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ "About seven in 10 (69%) college seniors who graduated from public and private nonprofit colleges in 2013 had student loan debt. These borrowers owed an average of \$28,400, up two percent compared to \$27,850 for public and nonprofit graduates in 2012." Matthew Reed and Debbie Cochrane, *Student Debt and the Class of 2013* (The Institute for College Access and Success, 2014), 1. Accessed November 18, 2014 from: <http://projectonstudentdebt.org/files/pub/classof2013.pdf>.

³⁸ Berea College in Kentucky offers one such example, which through a combination of comparatively small budgets and requiring students to work 10 hours per week in campus-related jobs has over time enabled it to grant every student a full tuition scholarship worth \$20,900 per year. Berea's website (www.berea.edu) has more information, as does Tamar Lewin's article "With No Frills or Tuition, a College Draws Notice," *New York Times*, July 21, 2008. Accessed November 10, 2014 from: http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/21/education/21endowments.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

³⁹ Ha-Joon Chang, *23 Things They Don't Tell You About Capitalism* (NY: Bloomsbury Press, 2010), 41.

⁴⁰ The work of Dan Ariely is particularly prominent to the general public in this field, due to the publication of his best-selling books *Predictably Irrational* (Harper Perennial, 2010), and *The (Honest) Truth About Dishonesty* (HarperCollins, 2012). However, these unexpected results have begun trickling up even to prominent financial institutions themselves: for example, in 2010 the Deutsche Bank published a report listing 9 different ways that the assumptions of *homo economicus* are debunked by the research evidence. Stefan Schneider, "Homo economicus – or more like Homer Simpson?," *Deutsche Bank Research*, (June 29, 2010), 7-15. Accessed November 12, 2014 from: http://www.dbresearch.com/PROD/DBR_INTERNET_EN-PROD/PROD0000000000259291.PDF

mission focused on mercy the most important contemporary research findings relate to the effects upon students of emphasizing a worldview that places selfishness at the center. As Frank, Gilovich, and Regan reported in their study, “Economists tend to behave less cooperatively than noneconomists along a variety of dimensions.”⁴¹ Moreover, by studying student responses to Prisoner Dilemma games and ethical surveys across the four years of their education and between different majors, it became clear that at least part of this effect was due to the economics training students received that repeatedly and intensively emphasized the necessity and rationality of acting purely in one’s own self-interest.⁴² Students were even found to self-report a reduced likelihood of acting honestly in response to ethical dilemmas posed to them, and to expect less honest responses from others around them, after just one semester of receiving instruction in microeconomics.

For an educational mission focused on mercy, none of the anti-social behavioral impacts listed above is a desirable outcome. Recognizing the complicity of one’s discipline in fostering negative behavioral outcomes will for most people not be a pleasant experience, and will on the contrary likely elicit resistance. This is the unsettling effect of mercy as a vector, smuggling in values and commitments that can fundamentally challenge disciplinary assumptions. In my own fields of theological and religious studies, for example, the emphasis on mercy radically calls into the question the importance of any doctrinal formulations, Christian or otherwise. If values such as mercy, and actions infused by them, are what matter most for a contemporary engagement of faith and reason, then although from a religious perspective these values arise out of religious narratives, symbols and dogmas, these are not in themselves foundationally important. They are the means (or mediation), but not the end. Likewise, with respect to the lifestyle of a professor in theological and religious studies, if one truly in mercy (*misericors*), has one’s heart (*cors*) with the poor (*miseri*), it will not existentially be possible to rest easy in academic reflection for reflection’s sake on the arcane aspects of religions as cultural phenomena in a world of extreme suffering. The upshot of the preceding examples is simply that while the specific mode of mercy’s impact will vary by discipline and profession, no field will remain uninfected by its unsettling effects: in this sense the solicitude of mercy is uncontainable and does not respect disciplinary boundaries. To play again with Jesus’ mustard seed image, perhaps this is why even today the U.S. Department of Agriculture lists *brassica negra* as a noxious weed in 10 different states!⁴³

⁴¹ R. H. Frank, T. Gilovich, and D. T. Regan, (1993). “Does Studying Economics Inhibit Cooperation?” *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 7(2), 1993, 167.

⁴² That is, the authors eliminated the possibility that economics students are on average less cooperative than other students simply due to an initial self-selection bias (i.e., more selfish students going into a field that emphasizes self-interest). Part of the impact of majoring in economics may simply arise due to the cognitive impact of constantly focusing on money. For example, people unconsciously “primed” with experiences or references to money were less helpful to people in need, less charitable in donating money, put more physical distance between themselves and a new acquaintance than participants not primed with money, and chose more individually focused leisure experiences rather than group leisure experiences. K. D. Vohs, N. L. Mead, and M. R. Goode, M. R., “The Psychological Consequences of Money,” *Science* 314 (2006), 1154-56.

⁴³ Accessed November 12, 2014 from: <http://www.ars-grin.gov/cgi-bin/npgs/html/taxon.pl?7666>

Of course, recognizing the radical import of mercy in any given area is not automatic or a given, but instead rests upon the depth of our commitment to mercy itself. The extent of our commitment to this value calls to mind the last aspect of mercy as a vector: having discussed the kinds of direction a focus on mercy proposes for our consideration, the question of the magnitude of our commitment to it remains. It is perhaps often the case that mercy regularly appears, at first blush, to be “unrealistic.” But what assumptions lie beneath this impression? Simply, as this term is often deployed, “realism” seems to mean focusing on the most selfish and fear-based aspects of reality, and then asserting that these worst aspects represent what is most real. I would argue that the persuasiveness of this approach to “realism” is likely rooted in evolutionary developments that made it advantageous to privilege aggressive responses to threats perceived to pose an immediate danger. However, what is actually advantageous in the long term is not always the same as what appears to be advantageous in the short term; there is significant evidence, for example, that our evolutionary success as humans rests on the fact that we have cooperated with each other more completely than any other animal species.⁴⁴ Moreover, and in relation to the focus of this essay, if we really wager our lives on the value of mercy, then it is precisely in the midst of ambiguity and uncertainty that the depth of our commitment to the value of mercy, the extent of our “faith” in it, becomes clear. When we abandon the value of mercy at the first sign of ambiguity (the lack of an immediately identifiable “successful” outcome), significant difficulty, or challenge, we thereby indicate that our faith in mercy is not very deep, that we in fact are not particularly willing to trust in and entrust ourselves to paths committed to mercy. For when else does one require faith than in the midst of uncertainty, when there appears to be no guarantee of obtaining one’s desired future outcomes? The challenge and invitation in relation to the “magnitude” aspect of mercy as a vector is the question: how much are you willing to wager that mercy truly does run “with the grain of the cosmos”?⁴⁵ This is the true wager of faith that a focus on mercy proposes to us.

Throughout this essay I have sought to indicate some of the transformative implications of placing “mercy” at the center of the CIT, and reverberations such a decision would have within the realm of Catholic higher education. As the philosopher Alex Rosenberg has strongly argued, questions of moral value lie beyond the parameters of the scientific method, which in our Western societies has largely been accepted as the only reasonable method of generating “knowledge.” If Rosenberg takes this as an indication that there is no such thing as “good” or “bad” in moral terms, a person wagering on mercy instead finds in this analysis an indication of just how much of what is most valuable to us as people rests on “faith” in one form or another. Beyond any medieval associations of theology with faith and philosophy with reason, this indicates that the most profound leap of faith Catholic institutions of higher education can invite their students to make is that of joining faith-based values such as mercy with technical

⁴⁴ For a summary of some of the evidence in relation to this point see Alex Rosenberg, “Chapter 6 – The Good News: Nice Nihilism,” in *The Atheist’s Guide to Reality*, 115-145.

⁴⁵ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1994), 246.

knowledge, in whatever sphere they are working. If one dares to make this leap in a significant way, one is quickly introduced to another way in which mercy functions as a vector in higher education, namely in the biological sense of “an organism that transmits a disease or parasite from one animal or plant to another.” Like the uncontrollable mustard seed *brassica negra* Jesus described in his parable, mercy smuggles subversive and disruptive implications into higher education both on the institutional level, and in relation to the purposes and assumptions of the various academic disciplines. Recognizing the radicality of the challenge posed by mercy to our working assumptions and ordinary ways of doing things, we find questions posed to us regarding the final aspect of mercy as a vector: how much faith do we actually have in mercy, what are we willing to wager on it, how willing are we to entrust ourselves to it?

Joél Z. Schmidt Former Assistant Professor/Religious and Theological Studies
B.Sc., University of Waterloo
M.T.S., Conrad Grebel University College
Ph.D., University of Notre Dame