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October 7, 2015: The Pretty Small University

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Title: The Pretty Small University

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10/7/2015—I mean to quibble. David Brooks wrote a column yesterday in the New York Times, entitled The Big University. In this column, Brooks argues for the future for universities founded in their original moral and spiritual mission, but secularized and open. The column manifests the ambiguity of the liberal mind in terms of truth and individual choice. Brooks acknowledges that "literary critics, philosophers and art historians are shy about applying the knowledge to real life." They are "afraid of being prescriptive because they idolize individual choice." But Brooks himself manifests the same hesitancy. He puts the issue as follows: "the trick is to find a way to talk about moral and spiritual things while respecting diversity." But the great universities of the past did not respect diversity. They presented an array of truths that they endorsed. And this was especially so in the canon of Great Western works. Yes, the universities respected different judgments by students and created a space for students to challenge the University's commitments, but the University stood by commitments all the same. This is not diversity. Brooks presents four tasks for the University. One, reveal moral options in our moral traditions, including the Jewish, Christian, and scientific traditions. But then Brooks adds the following: "then it's up to the students to determine which one or which combination is best to live by." No, the University endorses an array of truths to live by. The University does not simply present matters to be picked up by the student, like a smorgasbord. Here are the other tasks. Second, "foster transcendent experiences." In other words, surround the student with beauty and truth and commitment. Third, investigate current loves and teach new things to love. Fourth apply the humanities. What Brooks wants is moral instruction. He should ask, since universities used to engage in moral instruction, what killed it? Unfortunately for Brooks, and bad for us, is that what killed moral instruction is all the aspects of modernity that we endorse. Thus, we are trapped.