

# The Four Philosophical Families of Tzvetan Todorov and Universities. On the Degrees of Love and Language

*“Or more schematically: Autonomy of the I, finality of the you, universality of the they.”*

— Tzvetan Todorov

## Abstract

Tzvetan Todorov classifies philosophers into four families: Conservatives, scientists, individualists, and humanists, each with a unique approach to freedom and knowledge. He does not discuss categories of universities. This paper applies his framework of the four philosophical families to the academic landscape. Conservative universities emphasize tradition and stability, often resisting change. Scientific universities focus on empirical evidence and innovation, aligning with technical fields. Individualist universities prioritize creativity, autonomy, and personal expression, seen in liberal arts and entrepreneurial schools. Humanist universities, or reformist institutions, center on ethics and community, adapting to societal changes. Todorov’s framework explores how these institutions evolve in response to digital and technological shifts.

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## Keywords:

*Tzvetan Todorov, philosophical families, reformist universities, critical humanism, higher education, digital transformation*

Tzvetan Todorov not only classifies philosophers and thinkers in France after the 18th century into four families, but as he says in the prologue to *Imperfect Garden*, attempts to create a foundation for understanding today’s incredibly complex world (Todorov 2016, 24). One of his goals is to explain the ideology of liberal democracy and connect it to the humanist philosophical family, to which he pays particular attention in his book. I use Todorov’s foundation to build another understanding of one of the infrastructures of

liberal democracy (which is also an infrastructure for other political frameworks, but I am specifically interested in this one) – higher education and universities, because the author's critical humanism allows for the modification of established notions and breaking free from entrenched ways of thinking (Vaughan 2018, 69).

In his admirable book (Golsan 1988, 47), Todorov identifies four families of thinkers and philosophers. There are at least ten other possible classifications besides Todorov's: Ancient philosophical schools, medieval, continental schools, empiricists and rationalists, continental and empirical schools, ethical schools, political philosophy schools, and so on. However, Todorov prefers to build a classification of schools on the basis of the person's contract with the devil, which he sees in three variants: The first, when Jesus rejects in the desert; the second, when Mephistopheles accepts in literature; and the third, when after the Middle Ages and especially after the Renaissance, man discovers freedom, the freedom of his will, the freedom of his choice. However, Todorov prefers to build a classification of schools of thought on the basis of their position regarding a phenomenon he parabolically describes in terms of man's pact with the devil. He discusses the evolution of this parable by comparing three different versions of it. First, in the beginning of the Western calendar era, we have the Biblical account of how Jesus rejected Satan's temptation in the desert. Second, in the beginning of the modern era, we have the legendary account of how Johann Georg Faust accepted Mephistopheles's pernicious offer. Third, throughout the modern period, we have a historical account of how humanity (re)discovered free will, freedom of choice and, as a result of this, the value of liberty. According to Todorov, philosophers have different attitudes toward this freedom (Todorov 2016, 18), and they are divided into four families: Conservatives, scientists, individualists, and humanists (Todorov 2016, 22). In the French context, Todorov gives emblematic examples for each family: the philosophers Bonald, Condorcet, Sade, and Constant (Todorov 2016, 33).

Todorov himself challenges his own classification by saying that "it can always be objected that there are intermediate and mixed cases" (Todorov 2016, 34), and I really like that. The metaphor that I will present later in the text can also be criticized for not holding up to close scrutiny and for having intermediate, mixed cases of universities that do not fit neatly into one of the four families. The energy behind the defense of Todorov's classification, transferred to the profile of

modern universities and the existence of these four types in the future, is related to the question of how higher education will survive after the great reshuffling that digital technologies have caused in the fabric of knowledge and information. This reshuffling began much earlier, two centuries ago with the Industrial Revolution and the emergence of industrial printing as a new mode of production. The Industrial Revolution is actually not yet over, and the digital development is merely another phase of it.

Taking the side of humanism in the great philosophical debate of the 20th century between humanists and anti-humanists, Todorov develops his notion of “critical humanism”, continuing the ideas of Emmanuel Levinas by placing the Other and their well-being at the center of the world (Vaughan 2018). While many universities claim to center their work on the human being and their activities, their focus often diverges from the critical humanism that Todorov, the Bulgarian-French historian and philosopher, advocates in his writings. In this text, I pursue three goals: First, to argue that Tzvetan Todorov’s four philosophical families – conservative, scientist, individualist, and humanist – can be reflected in four distinct types of modern universities (Chukurliiev 2024, 310); second, to propose that Todorov’s concept of the three degrees of language – ranging from refusal to communicate, through insincere communication, to sincere and ethical dialogue – can also be traced within the university environment, though the most valued form is the least represented; and third, to suggest that Todorov’s classification of love into eros, philia, and agape may likewise be applied to university culture, where again the most selfless and humanistic form, agape, has been marginalized. By proposing this conceptual transfer – from Todorov’s philosophical categories to the institutional life of universities – I aim to spark a broader discussion about the future of higher education and to defend the importance of reformist universities in times of profound uncertainty.

Before I continue, I will outline the most important characteristics of the four philosophical families through the perspective of knowledge and education theory:

- **Conservative:** Tradition, stability, and authority when it comes to knowledge;
- **Scientific:** Knowledge based on empirical evidence, scientific approach, experiment, and innovation;

- **Individualist:** Central role for personal experience and interpretation, personal freedom, autonomy, and a critical approach to reality, passion in expressing oneself, one's essence, and personal perception of the world;
- **Humanist:** The Other and their experience are central – ethics, empathy, and morality guide the relationship. The Other is seen as autonomous and free, not as a means to an end, but as an end in themselves. In the educational context, this relationship is most clearly reflected in the bond between educator and student, where mutual respect and shared humanity are foundational. This family values the universality of human dignity and places it at the core of knowledge and learning.

Todorov does not seem to favor historicism in the area of literary studies, but with regard to the public sphere he argues that only by knowing and understanding the past can we successfully deal with the present (Marchitello 1988, 1). Just like the four philosophical families, historically, the four types of universities emerged, and it is precisely through understanding and knowing their evolution that we can understand the importance of each type for the existence of the entire higher educational system. Just like the four philosophical families, the four types of universities developed historically, and it is precisely through understanding and knowing their evolution in time that we can understand the importance of each type for the entire higher educational system. This system is now impossible without each one of them, but especially without those specializing in the humanities, which today have no choice but to be reformist. Let me connect the four philosophical families with universities.

## University Families

We can put the family of conservative universities with the oldest ones, those that first emerged in Medieval Europe. The family of conservative universities typically includes the oldest universities, those that have emerged first, some even as far back as the Middle Ages. These universities have existed for centuries, or much longer

than all others<sup>1</sup>, existence, which creates conditions for the emergence of traditions. The continuity of certain customs and moral values becomes part of their essence. They emphasize their age as a guarantee of the quality that has survived and developed over centuries. Tradition often implies the creation of hierarchies and structures, which, over time, become ossified. This static nature has a dual characteristic – on the one hand, it guarantees the successful conduct of processes, but on the other hand, particularly in dynamic times, it carries the risk of falling behind. Because of the characteristics described, conservative universities are often skeptical of innovations and changes in teaching and the methods of examination, the application of new technologies, and changes in the content and structure of academic programs. Universities of this type develop slow administrative procedures, and the academic hierarchy is very strict. They are often large, public educational institutions.

In historical terms, the scientific universities come next. They are associated with the Age of Enlightenment and the emergence of modern science. Unlike the conservative universities, which developed in close connection with religion, the scientific ones are based primarily on empirical knowledge and the scientific method. The Age of Enlightenment paved the way for discoveries that lead to technological breakthroughs, which fundamentally changed economic life. The Industrial Revolution, a direct consequence of this phenomenon, introduced the need for workers with specific skills. By the late 18th and early 19th centuries, technical, medical, and engineering universities emerged, where various disciplines were studied based on experiments and a scientific approach to a given question or problem. Lately, the abbreviation STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) gained currency regarding them.

As we move on to the next family, the individualist one, we must delve into the arts, where, on the one hand, there is theoretical knowledge and practical skills that can be studied formally and systematically, but on the other hand, these skills, even when mastered perfectly, will not produce the desired effect – bringing forth artists who have talent in creating or interpreting works. These are universities and higher

<sup>1</sup> Examples such as Sofia University are interesting, which, despite being the oldest in Bulgaria in terms of tradition, cannot boast 136 years because after 1944, its development in one direction was practically interrupted, and it was given an entirely different one. Its mission and value system were completely replaced (Boyadjieva 2010, 96).

schools of the arts, often called academies and conservatories. At them, individual skills and characteristics of students are highly valued. The main focus is on expressing oneself and expressing one's uniqueness and potential. Key qualities in them are talent, freedom, and creativity. Rather unexpectedly, we must also include business academies here, which aim to create entrepreneurs and leaders for the management sector, where the ability to earn money is as much a technical skill as a subjective one, related to talent and individual qualities. Ideally, these educational institutions should offer their students individual learning or the opportunity to create their own study program – unique for each student according to their personality.

Next is the humanist family and its reflection in the university world. My thesis is that these universities today are the reformist ones, which change their internal structure and follow Todorov's three principles: autonomy of the "I", the purposefulness of the "you," and universality of the "they". In these universities, every member of the community – professor, student, or administrator – has equal dignity, rights, and freedom to be themselves; this "self" is a value that lies at the core of the philosophy of the structure and functioning of these universities. For every member of this community, the well-being of the others is of primary value, and their actions should conform to this principle. Together in such an institution, all its members are universally united by the fact that they are humans, free, and dignified. In these universities, a variety of disciplines are studied, with human experience, ethics, and the ability to be part of human society at the forefront. We can call them humanistic, but that would not be sufficiently clear, because their main quality is that they are dynamic structures that are influenced by societal changes, and offer new methods of teaching, even for classical and traditionally based disciplines. Although they emerged last – in the European context, their appearance is influenced by significant socio-political upheavals like the student protests of 1968 or the collapse of totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe. They also share a foundational lineage with the earliest forms of higher education in Antiquity – the philosophical schools of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle – which arose from the need to understand, explain, and navigate a world marked by rapid change and shifting values.

Unfortunately, there is no way to ask Tzvetan Todorov what he thinks of this classification and where he would place himself if he were a university professor. When Todorov talks about himself as a

professor, he is more of a scientist, but by no means an individualist or conservative – on the contrary, he firmly opposes the thesis that literature should be taught as a set of names, years and facts – as such, Bogdan Bogdanov engages with him in a posthumous dialogue in his essay *The Real and Potential Foreigner*<sup>2</sup>. For Todorov, students should be provided with tools that will enable them to understand any text (Zbinden and Todorov 2004, 7). When he talks about himself as a scholar, he describes himself in a way that a humanistic university should look: “Of course, the subject of study changes, but the object of knowledge, conceptually developed, remains the same: these are specifically human activities, linguistic and cultural, moral and political, observed in their historical specificity.” (Zbinden and Todorov 2004, 4).

Where does Tzvetan Todorov locate the intellectual? Since he closely links the intellectual to the figure of the university professor, we can infer from his view what role the university itself plays. Todorov draws a distinction – and even a contrast – between “the Campus” and “the City” as two possible spheres where intellectuals or professors might belong (Zbinden and Todorov 2004, 10). As may be expected, but also somewhat in contradiction to his own choice, Todorov believes that universities should be connected to the actual, real human life. These are the reformist universities, which, unlike the almost religiously isolated conservative universities, and the campus-laboratories of scientific universities, are either literally or metaphorically in the city, because they are connected to it, to real life. Here, Todorov’s humanism takes center stage, emphasizing that while other philosophical or university models may leave room for elitist approaches to understanding the world and defining freedom, the humanist model prioritizes inclusivity, dignity, and ethical responsibility toward the Other.

## The Role of Love in Education: Eros, Philia, and Agape

In the world of pedagogy, love and the heart as its vessel, appears in many places, but it is telling that the founders of modern

<sup>2</sup> “A more accurate view is the complex idea that totalitarianism and democracy are only the political tips of the iceberg of human nature, at the base of which the two calls alternate in a complex way – the call for freedom and independence, but also for unfreedom and the joyful surrender of one’s own will to another. The boundaries between them are blurred, which does not hinder us, if we decide to act instrumentally, from presenting them more distinctly with regard to some form of good.” (Bogdanov 2001, 241-250).

pedagogy – John Comenius and Johann Pestalozzi, especially the latter – highlight its foundational role. The understanding of the finality of you (*la finalité du tu*), which is a central thesis for Todorov in *Imperfect Garden* (Todorov 2016, 197–228), is discussed as key to understanding the present, but also links it directly to the degrees of love. It is specifically connected to the second degree of love – **philia** – and stands in contrast with Christian love towards God and physical love towards the body of the other as an object of possession (Zbinden and Todorov 2004, 17).

Translated into the language of universities, this triad can be modified as follows: Todorov's description of **eros** reflects the desire to transfer and acquire information, specific and structured in corpora of signs – depending on the sign system used by a particular science, these may be textbooks, musical scores, collections of tasks, theorems, and the like, albums with reproductions. As Todorov notes, this feeling and attitude towards the other, in this case towards knowledge, is doomed to be unhappy. In one case, knowledge is boundless, and the more we know, the more the contact zone between the known and the unknown expands. In the other case, once acquired, knowledge invites us to seek new knowledge, and the thirst is never quenched. This is the driving force behind all formal education. University education is no exception. That is why campuses have libraries – to give all sides of the educational process a sense that this thirst can be satisfied. If we return to the four families of philosophers/universities, the knowledge object of *eros* is treated differently by each. For conservatives, knowledge is carefully codified and preserved in structured corpora. For scientists, it is organized into data, formulas, and schematics – tools for testing and innovation. For individualists, knowledge consists of examples, works, and expressions drawn from the uniqueness of others – collected in books, galleries, performances, and exhibitions. For the humanists, however, knowledge is deeply relational: it is not merely accumulated but approached with ethical responsibility. Here, *eros* becomes a yearning not only for information, but for understanding the human condition through shared narratives, moral reflection, and dialogue. Libraries in humanist institutions are thus not just repositories of facts, but spaces of connection between minds across time.

In a university environment, **philia** is what, according to Todorov, constitutes the highest happiness in human life: a sense of community and connection, where learners and educators are in one place

because they are important to each other as human beings. I will cite my favorite motto, once displayed above the entrance of the Galatan School in Kotel, Bulgaria – now a museum of carpets: “Help me elevate you!”. This motto brings to mind Montaigne’s famous explanation, quoted by Todorov, of his friendship with Étienne de la Boétie: “*If you press me to say why I loved him, I can say no more than because it was he, because it was I*”. Together, these expressions capture the miracle that occurs when a cycle of intellectual energy emerges between educator and student – born from the mutual joy of each other’s presence: the one who knows, and the one who desires to know. It is not only the recognition of the other person’s existence that matters, but also the shared delight in the knowledge they possess, exchange, and renew together. Today, this is especially powerful and important, as the digital revolution divides educators from students. I am not saying that by default the students are on the one side and we are on the other. The knowledge of the other person, respect for them, and, above all, the awareness that they exist and are valuable is a starting point for what happens on university campuses, or on those of humanist universities. If we translate this claim into modern pedagogical language, we can use the formulation given by Lyudmil Georgiev in the Strategic Plan for the Development of New Bulgarian University – shared leadership between students and teachers, which for him is one of the main goals that higher education should achieve (Georgiev 2023, 9). This shared leadership requires the complete renunciation of the teacher’s ego and provokes not only a willingness to conduct the educational process according to collaboratively established rules but also to revise and change the very educational content itself. However, imagine this teacher, who each semester must face their students ready to change the course – sometimes a little, but sometimes significantly. This teacher must have the mental flexibility of a first-class yogi, yet both the body and the mind tend to lose their agility with age. Reformist universities establish a structure in which love for knowledge – and for the other, in all their diversity and uniqueness – is reflected in the design of their curricula: a solid core of thoughtfully selected, essential courses serves as the roots and trunk, while students are offered wide freedom to shape the “crown” of their learning through a broad range of engaging elective courses tailored to their interests and identities.

Where is **agape**? Théophile Gautier, in the preface to “Mademoiselle de Maupin” (1835), says: “There is nothing truly beautiful unless it is

useless; everything useful is ugly”. Later, at the end of the same century, Oscar Wilde brought this idea to its extreme by declaring “art for art’s sake”. But what lies behind “knowledge for knowledge’s sake”? Could this be the root of today’s widespread contempt for the humanities? With their stories, concepts, and reflections, the humanities are often dismissed as impractical – standing outside the increasingly dominant belief that university education must align directly with business needs. This, in my view, is a dangerous and poisonous mantra. It gradually transforms universities from being leaders and guardians of knowledge into mere subcontractors of a consumer society driven by production, consumption, and profit. Is human curiosity always awakened by practical motives?

In this case, we could say that even **agape** is the other face of **eros** in the realm of knowledge. An **eros** that has realized its own unhappiness and replaced it with its rethinking as the ultimate form of reverence for knowledge, humility, and awe before its essence. This higher and unconditional love, which Todorov exemplifies by the feeling towards God or that of a parent towards their children, in the university context, is that moment when you need to convince students of the benefit of studying Latin or Ancient Greek, the history of a given subject area, or another body of knowledge that, at first glance, seems highly impractical. At first glance, just like the humanities. What nourishes the imagination? For now, I will leave these as rhetorical questions. There are academic disciplines that may appear redundant in today’s world, but there are others – particularly within the humanities – for which it is our responsibility to persuade students of their enduring importance. Yet who gets to decide which knowledge is truly obsolete and which only appears impractical from a narrow, utilitarian point of view? When I say “convince,” I return to the central role of language and communication – tools that are themselves cultivated by the very disciplines most often neglected: anthropology, linguistics, philosophy, and history. These are not relics of the past, but essential lenses through which we understand the present and imagine a future that is not merely profitable, but meaningful.

If this were not an article but a recipe for creating a university, I would suggest a balanced mixture: One-thirds, each drawn from the three fundamental attitudes toward knowledge that Tzvetan Todorov describes – *eros* (the desire for knowledge), *philia* (the joy of learning in community), and *agape* (the selfless reverence for knowledge).

In my view, today's universities tend to overemphasize the first and third – *eros* and *agape* – while *philia*, the relational and dialogical middle ground, is too often neglected. This imbalance becomes even more apparent when we turn to Todorov's related concept: the types of communication and language.

## The Three Types of Communication and Language

Todorov distinguishes between three types of communication, drawing on Montaigne's reflections. The first is a refusal to communicate with others – an inward, solitary dialogue with oneself. The second takes place within society, where human weaknesses such as vanity, envy, and the desire for approval often lead to insincere or manipulative language. The third, and most valued by Todorov, is genuine communication with another person – honest, reciprocal, and grounded in mutual respect. This sincere dialogue, associated with friendship and ethical humanism, is essential not only in personal life but also in the university environment (Todorov 2016, 190–191).

Todorov himself, in life, resembled Rousseau in this regard. He valued sincere communication but, as he admitted, the trauma of his childhood in Bulgaria left him distrustful of public life (Zbinden and Todorov 2004, 6). He chose solitude as a way to write and thus communicate with others on his own terms.

How do these three types of communication manifest in the university setting?

**The first type**, or refusal to communicate, can be seen in purely one-way teaching: lectures that transmit information without room for response, dialogue, or adaptation based on student feedback.

**The second type**, insincere communication, may arise when educators or students speak out of obligation, flattery, or strategic ambiguity – where the real content or intention is obscured. This can also occur when either party withholds key information or fails to engage honestly.

**The third type**, sincere communication, happens when educators and students meet as equals in dignity, engaging in open, reciprocal dialogue. It involves shared inquiry, a willingness to listen, and the joy of discovering understanding together.

While the university may contain all three, it is only in this third, most humanistic form that true learning and transformation take place.

Let's begin with the lowest type of communication, which is also the easiest to achieve – and likely the most widespread. Instructors often do not explain to students why a given subject is being taught, or why they are expected to acquire and demonstrate specific knowledge. This lack of explanation is not always a conscious refusal; it may stem from an unquestioned belief that the value of the subject is self-evident. At times, this attitude may resemble the third form of love – knowledge for knowledge's sake – but more often it reflects an unwillingness to change: to update our lectures, to revise course content, or even to reconsider the subject's name and structure.

In many universities, students are excluded from decisions about their curriculum. They cannot influence what they study or how it is taught. Much of the academic content delivered today remains unchanged, disconnected from the realities of the digital age. In these cases, it is not the content itself that is “unaware” of the digital revolution, but rather the educators who teach it – and who often struggle or fail to make sense of the transformations happening around them.

French academic and novelist Laurent Binet provocatively links this type of language to what he calls its “seventh function” (Binet 2022): A fictional but persuasive mechanism that manipulates others beneath the surface of communication. In his narrative, many of Todorov's contemporaries – including Todorov himself – are drawn into this speculative web of influence and linguistic power.

According to Binet, language has another function besides the classic six<sup>3</sup> described by Roman Jakobson (Waugh 1980, 58) a function that serves to subordinate the will of another to yourself and make them do what you want without them realizing it – the novel is worth reading. I am confusing again Todorov's “degrees”, Jakobson's “functions”, and Binet's fictional “seventh function”. Convincing students of a particular ideology, political stance, or religious doctrine is something excluded from secular universities and is even classified as a crime in modern democratic states. A teacher who would do this may be, and most likely is, sincerely convinced of their own correctness, but

<sup>3</sup> Roman Jakobson outlined six key functions of language: the **referential** (conveying information), **emotive** (expressing the speaker's feelings), **conative** (influencing the listener), **phatic** (establishing contact), **metalingual** (discussing language itself), and **poetic** (focusing on the form of the message).

they have no right to this manipulation. They may present their thesis according to the rules of sincere speech, but in contrast to the other existing views, especially in a competitive context. The dimensions of insincere language could be expanded in other directions, but that is not the goal of this inquiry. Of course, sincere communication in the classroom does not mean persuading students to adopt the instructor's worldview. Sincerity must be paired with openness to difference – what Todorov might call *dialogical humanism*. Even humanism, if presented without contrast or critical distance, risks becoming dogma. The task, then, is not to eliminate conviction, but to place it in conversation with other possible truths.

Refusal to communicate, both for Todorov and Rousseau, whom he analyzes (Todorov 2016, 178), is insincere because when writing, one is communicating with others. But this communication is non-dialogical. The disadvantages of non-dialogical communication will not be discussed in this text, and the reader can imagine them themselves. What are the benefits of it, and how are they realized in the university environment?

An interesting perspective on communication – especially in its solitary form – is offered by Irene Vallejo, who compellingly narrates the history of the written word and the intellectual innovations of Greco-Roman antiquity (Vallejo 2023). In today's digitally mediated world, the ability to read, analyze, and synthesize information remains a vital skill – one that is often cultivated through sustained engagement with books. University education, particularly within the humanities, still relies heavily on this form of interaction. But while reading is a powerful cognitive act, it is also inherently one-directional and non-dialogical. In this sense, it can reflect Todorov's first type of communication – a refusal to engage directly with the other, even as it builds intellectual depth. The refusal to communicate can have several degrees of its own. Objectively, authors of written works who are no longer alive can reach students in their original form only through books, while others, still living, may not speak the same language or reside in the same place. You get the idea. More worrying is the refusal to communicate that hide behind pretended communication – when you do not respect the other's viewpoint, mythologize, or worst of all, literally deliver lectures. The absence of communication but the presence of interaction in the university environment bears this dual charge – of inspiring and nurturing imagination and reflection, but on the other hand, placing

one party in a subordinate position without the right to respond, ask questions, or to comment. There is another dimension to this zero degree, when the students in the classroom remain silent: they do not ask questions or answer when you ask them something. Every teacher has been in this situation, and lately, it has a particular dimension – it's not that the students don't want to ask or don't know the answer, but they have the feeling that professors/educators are so different, distant, estranged from them, that they don't think it possible to effectively communicate with them, to find a common language.

According to Todorov and the humanist philosophers he engages with, the most valuable quality of language is its capacity to be open, honest, and sincere. Without *philia* – the middle form of love, grounded in friendship, mutual recognition, and shared joy – such sincere language cannot thrive. This is why I suggest reading Todorov's two hierarchies – of love and of communication – not in isolation but as a unified system of interpretation. Together, they provide a powerful lens through which to understand the dynamics of academic life. These hierarchies are not themselves present in universities as concrete structures; rather, they are conceptual frameworks that allow us to analyze and reflect on how different attitudes toward knowledge and language play out within the university environment. **Philia** is a prerequisite for the existence of sincere language, and conversely, sincere language fosters the feeling of joy from the existence of the other with their speech. Sincere language has many dimensions – from the most obvious one of telling only the truth, saying what you think, through academic ethics and transparency, to the use of various auxiliary tools in the creation of texts (as well as images and sound, but they remain more within the individualist family) such as generative software, which I continuously use to check, improve, and find more easily.<sup>4</sup> But it also comes to the point where it must be said that higher education is not mandatory, that it has not always been

<sup>4</sup> In writing this text, I used both the beta JSTOR AI research tool and OpenAI's ChatGPT (<https://chat.openai.com>), accessed on September 6, 2024. I view this as a form of augmented thinking: AI was used not to generate original arguments or replace intellectual labor, but to clarify phrasing, suggest alternative formulations, and help articulate complex ideas more fluently – particularly when refining syntax or translating philosophical terms into accessible academic language. Every conceptual decision, structural choice, and critical interpretation remains my own. This approach raises important questions: What constitutes legitimate use of AI in academic writing? How does collaboration with such a tool influence an author's thinking? I believe AI can be a valuable assistant – like an editorial companion or a real-time reader – but it should not replace the reflective, critical, and ethical responsibilities of scholarly work. Naming these tools transparently is one small step toward developing a shared understanding of academic integrity in a new technological context.

strictly formal. Also, the other party must have the security to indicate that the knowledge they are receiving is incomprehensible to them and should either be replaced or adapted. Sincere language teaches that both parties in communication are equal in their freedom, dignity, and humanity. There are many obstacles – the epigonic belief that each succeeding generation drags history towards its decline and end; the conviction that the young are illiterate and do not know what they should know; the sense of superiority when neither side can move forward without the knowledge that the other provides.

Academic communities face a vital task: to redevelop and protect the practice of sincere language. They must be able to explain why students and educators are walking the same path – what unites them beyond formal roles or requirements. The place of universities today is uncertain, as many of the skills they once uniquely cultivated now have accessible alternatives – not just the skills themselves, but the institutions that teach them. Digital technologies and artificial intelligence are reshaping not only professions but every dimension of our lives. Without sincere speaking – and the action that follows it – the road ahead for higher education is bleak. Sincere language can still emerge in new forms and pedagogical methods, but once communication has settled into either a monologic or manipulative mode, it becomes increasingly difficult to switch to one that is authentic and reciprocal.

## Uncertain Times

Todorov connects the humanist philosophical family with liberal democracy – arguing that it is the only political system capable of ensuring the peaceful coexistence of all four philosophical families. Similarly, in the realm of higher education, a humanist approach is essential for balancing the different institutional types. From this perspective, humanist universities are not just another model; they are reformist universities and potential agents of positive change throughout the entire academic ecosystem.

In Bulgaria, unfortunately, such universities are not recognized as distinct. Instead, they are assessed according to frameworks designed for conservative or scientific institutions – especially the latter. Over the past decade, there has been a growing trend toward evaluating

all universities by scientific metrics: measurable outputs, research quantification, and narrowly defined employability standards. This has created a climate of suspicion toward disciplines traditionally rooted in reading and reflection.

Yet the capacity for analysis and synthesis is not born from reading alone – it emerges from humanistic knowledge. And perhaps the strongest argument in its favor is not technical at all, but philosophical: humanistic knowledge fosters imagination. It develops the ability to envision not only what is, but what could be – a quality indispensable for any society hoping to educate free, thoughtful, and responsible individuals.

Cautiously, during a lecture, I asked my students what they knew about Homer’s *Iliad* and the Trojan War. I assumed it wouldn’t be much – but my real goal was to lead them toward the *Odyssey* and to let them know that such a work exists. After a few minutes of storytelling, one of the students interrupted and asked, “But you’re talking about *EPIC*<sup>5</sup>, right?!” I, for my part, didn’t know what that was. And yet I was charmed: we were recognizing the same thing, each from within our own cultural codes – shaped by different systems, different generations. That shared moment reminded me why I still believe in the university. Its future – as a place for the formal pursuit of higher knowledge – is viable only, in my view, if it remains grounded in the principles Todorov outlines in *Imperfect Garden*: the joy of encountering the Other, the desire to support their flourishing, and the ability to communicate with them through sincere language.

Reformist universities are moving in this direction. They may not always have a clearly marked path ahead, but with each conversation, each act of trust, each revision of what teaching means, they are laying the stones of that path themselves.

## Conclusion

In his work, Tzvetan Todorov outlines four key philosophical families – conservative, scientist, individualist, and humanist – each with distinct approaches to understanding the world. These families

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<sup>5</sup> EPIC: The Musical is a modern adaptation of Homer’s *Odyssey*, created by Jorge Rivera-Herrans, blending traditional epic storytelling with contemporary musical styles to bring the story of Odysseus to a new generation.

can serve as a framework to categorize contemporary universities, helping us explore the ways higher education responds to societal demands and changes in knowledge dissemination. Todorov's classification, though initially focused on philosophical thought, offers an angle for examining the evolution of educational institutions in today's complex and digitally driven world.

Conservative universities align with institutions that emphasize tradition, stability, and established norms – traditional state universities that maintain a cautious approach to change, focusing on the preservation of established academic disciplines and classical methods of teaching. They prioritize stability in their academic and administrative structures, much like the conservative family in Todorov's framework, which values continuity and resistance to sudden shifts.

Universities associated with the scientist family focus on empirical knowledge, innovation, and technological progress. Technical and research-intensive institutions exemplify this group, as they prioritize the application of the scientific method, research, and STEM disciplines. They mirror the scientist family's commitment to reason, experimentation, and progress, playing a crucial role in driving technological advancements and applying empirical findings to real-world problems.

Todorov's individualist family corresponds to liberal arts colleges and entrepreneurial universities, where personal freedom, creativity, and autonomy are at the forefront. These institutions emphasize personal development, critical thinking, and individual expression, encouraging students to carve their own intellectual paths. They are entrepreneurial in nature, fostering environments where students are encouraged to innovate and take risks. This mirrors the individualist family's focus on individual agency and the importance of personal freedom in shaping one's education and career.

Finally, the humanist family corresponds to reformist and comprehensive universities, which integrate ethics, social responsibility, and the humanities into their educational models. These institutions aim to balance technical education with a commitment to ethical reflection, cultural awareness, and community well-being. They are rooted in Todorov's critical humanism, where the other's well-being is central, and they advocate for a dynamic and flexible

approach to education, responding to modern challenges while preserving humanistic values.

These universities are under the greatest pressure from the institutions that regulate higher education. Because of their dynamic and flexible nature—open to experimentation and change—they often do not fit neatly within the standardized frameworks of accreditation and governance. Even within the European context, reformist universities frequently face obstacles when trying to operate in accordance with their own values and rhythms. They are often compelled to adjust their schedules, structures, and curricula in ways that compromise their internal logic – stretching timelines, compressing learning processes, or bending institutional space to meet external expectations. In countries like Todorov’s homeland, where humanistic values are still unestablished and the traces of totalitarian past can easily seep into the administrative and bureaucratic procedures of the present, these universities are a rarity and lead a difficult existence. The paradox is that they hold the potential to shape the profile of higher education for the future.

Hristo Chukurliyev

Philosophical Family	Characteristics	University Type	Degrees of Love	Degrees of Communication
Conservative	Tradition, stability, authority, resistance to change	Traditional State Universities	Focuses on institutional tradition (agape/eros)	Non-communication, emphasis on hierarchy
Scientist	Empirical knowledge, scientific method, innovation	Technical and Research-Intensive Universities	Encourages thirst for knowledge (eros/agape)	Efficient, but often impersonal communication
Individualist	Personal freedom, creativity, autonomy, critical thinking	Liberal Arts Colleges, Entrepreneurial Universities	Emphasizes personal intellectual connection (agape/eros)	Emphasis on personal, critical dialogue
Humanist	Ethics, social responsibility, community well-being, reform	Reformist and Comprehensive Universities	Promotes selfless love of knowledge and finally of the other (philia)	Authentic, ethical, and inclusive communication

Figure 1: Types of universities and degrees of love and communication.

Todorov's framework also offers valuable insight into how different forms of love – and by extension, different motivations for learning – manifest within the university. His triad of *eros*, *philia*, and *agape* represents three distinct orientations toward knowledge and others. In higher education, we can see all three at work: *eros* as the desire to possess and accumulate knowledge; *philia* as the joy of learning in companionship and mutual recognition; and *agape* as the selfless reverence for knowledge and its transmission for the good of others. Looking into this framework allows us to better understand the emotional and ethical undercurrents of academic life – and reminds us that education is not only intellectual, but also deeply relational.

Similarly, Todorov's analysis of communication – divided into non-communication, insincere communication, and sincere communication – is highly relevant to university settings. Sincere communication, where both students and educators engage authentically and equally, is essential for creating environments where intellectual and personal growth can flourish. Yet, many institutions struggle with insincere communication, where the emphasis on results and performance often eclipses genuine dialogue and learning.

The challenges posed by digital technologies and artificial intelligence require that universities adapt, but Todorov's critical humanism offers a path forward. Reformist universities, grounded in humanist values, are uniquely positioned to navigate this digital age by promoting education that integrates ethics, cultural awareness, and the intrinsic value of knowledge. Such institutions must ensure that even as technology advances, the human being remains at the center of the educational process.

In conclusion, Todorov's four philosophical families offer a framework for understanding the diversity of higher education models. Conservative, scientific, individualist, and humanist universities all play essential roles in shaping the future of learning. Reformist institutions, in particular, embody the principles of Todorov's humanist family, advocating for a humanistic and flexible approach to education in times of great uncertainty. As digital technologies continue to transform the academic landscape, the reformist model holds the potential to preserve and promote the human-centered values that are vital to the survival and evolution of higher education.

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