

Contents

Introduction	1
I Universities: The recovery of an idea	7
1. <i>A very short history of universities in Britain and abroad</i>	7
2. <i>Explaining the value of universities</i>	26
3. <i>University education</i>	45
4. <i>University research</i>	80
5. <i>University management</i>	114
6. <i>Financing the system</i>	131
7. <i>Recovering the idea</i>	155
II Human nature and the study of the humanities	171
III Interdisciplinary <i>versus</i> multidisciplinary study.	185
IV Information systems and the concept of a library	195
V The prospects for e-learning	211
VI Intellectual integrity and the realities of funding	229
VII Spiritual values and the knowledge economy	243
VIII Reforming universities: How to lose the plot	263
References	285
Index	287

Introduction

The opening and longest essay in this collection is a revised version of a short book published in 2002. Its title is a deliberate allusion to John Henry Newman's *The Idea of a University*. Newman's essay, originally a series of lectures (or 'Discourses') delivered in Dublin in advance of the establishment of the Catholic University of Ireland in 1854, which first appeared as a set of pamphlets, and soon after bound together, is still in print.

The context for these lectures was a dispute that has no interest for most people today. Newman was providing a theoretical defence of the Irish Catholic hierarchy's objection to the secular university colleges established in Ireland by the British Government in 1845 (though ironically this Catholic alternative eventually formed the basis of the National University of Ireland which united most of these same colleges). He mounts his defence on the strength of a thesis that is unlikely to meet with much support in contemporary universities, namely the impossibility of a secular, non-religious university education. As a consequence of this context, a central part of his argument has to do with the role and teaching of theology, a subject absent from the curricula of most modern British universities, and a minority subject where it is still taught. A further, substantial part of the lectures is devoted to reconciling the authority of the church with the investigations of modern science, another topic likely to be of limited interest today.

Yet despite these important differences between Newman's time and ours, *The Idea of a University* (especially Discourses V, VI and VII) still has things to say that are relevant to thinking about contemporary universities.

More surprising than this continuing relevance, however, is the fact that in the one hundred and forty years since Newman wrote, his book has had no significant successor, even though monumental changes have taken place in universities during this same period. More striking still is the fact that Newman's is one of very few attempts *ever* made to think directly about the nature and purpose of a university. Given the age of the institution, and its importance to the intellectual and cultural life of this country over many centuries, this is a remarkable fact.

There are a few exceptions to this generalization. Ronald Barnett is an educational theorist who has made 'higher' education his special subject and written several books about it, but they differ from Newman's in being intended for a largely 'professional' readership of educationalists and hence written in professionalized style. A volume with aspirations to a wider audience is *The New Idea of a University* by Duke Maskell and Ian Robinson (London, 2001) where Newman is expressly discussed. Maskell and Robinson explore what they see as a radical departure among contemporary universities from the 'old' idea and they claim that in recent times '[t]he university has been remade not in defiance of Newman but in indifference to him. But he says things that, if anybody paid attention to them, could not fail to kill instantly our new orthodoxy about the universities making us rich' (Maskell and Robinson 2001: 25). Now whatever the justice of their complaint, the fact is as I have just suggested, that the context of Newman's lectures was inevitably quite different to that of the present day. His *Discourses* undertake to characterize and defend what has come to be known as a liberal education. Though often cited in

defence of more arcane subjects by university teachers, the actual influence that is to be attributed to his book has probably been overestimated. It is the traditional American liberal arts college that has come closest to Newman's ideal, not the universities of Britain from whose experience his reflections arose. There is to my mind a dangerous romanticism in thinking that, once upon a time British universities were suitably Newmansque until the arrival of utilitarian Philistines, and Maskell and Robinson constantly run the risk of falling into this trap. In several places Newman's 'arguments' are weak, as it seems to me, and to call upon them is unlikely 'to kill instantly' the ideas that have won favour in the minds of many modern academics. Nevertheless, there is something important to emulate in Newman's enterprise — the spirit of inquiring clearly and critically into the very idea of a university and its value.

The purpose of the first essay, then, is not to review or revitalize Newman's arguments, though, since a number of the themes he addresses are still topical, I shall refer to some of his claims from time to time in the chapters that follow. Nor is it my aim to deplore the present and lament the past, a charge that might be brought against Maskell and Robinson with some justice. Rather, my purpose is to draw attention to a number of interrelated issues that are of considerable contemporary significance, to examine them in a sustained way, and in this way, it is to be hoped, begin a discussion that is long overdue — namely some inquiry into how we should regard universities and what it is reasonable to expect from them.

The publication of the original version led to a number of invitations from academic institutions in Britain and Europe to lecture on some of its themes. In every case, the invitation arose from the belief that traditional academic values and institutions have come under close scrutiny, and sometimes attack, in the light of changing circum-

stances. Some of these are quite extraneous changes — the explosion in information technology for instance — and others are more endogenous — the pressure to engage in research across disciplines, or to ‘skew’ scientific inquiry in the pursuit of funding. Rather than simply re-iterate topics discussed in the original short book, I took these opportunities to extend the discussion into broader areas. There are clear points of contact, though I have not expressly identified them, and the additional essays are free standing.

The discussion of all these topics faces a special difficulty, the risk of being pigeon-holed, that is, of being automatically bracketed with one of two opposed positions. On the one side there is the modernizer who believes that old ideas must be abandoned in the face of the necessity to deal with ‘reality’, and on the other there is the ‘traditionalist’ who believes that every such move sells the pass on values and institutions that are vital to civilization as we know it, and to which we should fight to return. Yet these two views are caricatures of each other. ‘Realism’ in this context tends to mean pragmatism — accepting imposed solutions so that universities survive, not so much to fight another day, as just to see it dawn. ‘Idealism’ means taking a principled stand even in circumstances that virtually guarantee its futility. If serious thinking about universities and the policies that should govern them is to take place, it is essential that the straight-jacketed thinking this sort of dichotomy inevitably induces be abandoned. Yet in a simplistic way it does reflect, dimly, an important distinction between, on the one hand, the pursuit of objectives that stand some chance of being realized and on the other the rejection of goals entirely dictated by political fashion or public purse strings. The truth is that in this context, as in nearly every other, practical rationality requires us to engage in a dialectical relationship between realism and idealism. Ideals that have no realistic prospect of coming

about are practically worthless; survival, even prosperity, that is not in any way determined by critically chosen goals cannot count as success. In all the topics I discuss my aim has been to steer an intelligent course between this particular version of Scylla and Charybdis.

These remarks explain the title of the collection. *The Institution of Intellectual Values* is deliberately ambiguous since it might be taken to refer to the university as just such an institution, or to the business of finding ways in which intellectual values can be given institutional expression. My concern is with both these questions, which are evidently interrelated, and my subtitle indicates that it is in the dialectical exchange between realism and idealism that I think the most illuminating sort of answers are to be found.

This very complexity, however, gives rise to the second difficulty. The variety of topics that need to be considered if we are to introduce any measure of coherence into thinking about the modern university is very considerable. It is necessary to sketch the history of the institution, to consider the ideas of higher education and academic research, to record recent social trends, to look at a spectrum of social policies, to explore cultural images, to examine educational methods, and to review the economics of public finance. This range of tasks is somewhat daunting. Yet it is at heart, in my view, philosophical, and it is questions in the philosophy of education which must make the running.

My approach to them is that of a professional philosopher, largely because that is my discipline. Yet I hope that readers from all disciplines and none will find the treatment both interesting and novel. There are topics which are not properly speaking those of philosophy, yet there are things about them that only a philosopher would, or could, say. The nature of a university and its activities are among these. If my professional mode of thinking and

writing has enabled me to preserve in their exploration philosophy's intellectual virtues — chiefly clarity and rigour — then these essays will have the merit of setting out certain questions, and some answers to them, in a manner which makes their debate more precise, and hence more profitable. At any rate, this is my aim, and, given the breadth of the subject, to have realised it is as much as could be reasonably wished for.