Introduction

The title of this book has been chosen in allusion to John Henry Newman's *The Idea of a University*. Newman's essay was originally a series of lectures (or 'Discourses') delivered in Dublin in advance of the establishment of the Catholic University of Ireland in 1854. The essay first appeared as a set of pamphlets, soon after to be bound together and is still in print.

The context for these lectures was a dispute which 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 century and a half since Newman wrote, his book has had no significant successor, even though monumental changes have taken place in universities during this same period. Indeed, 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 is one recent exception to this generalization, namely *The New Idea of a University* by Duke Maskell and Ian Robinson (London, 2001) which expressly discusses Newman, and deplores what it sees as a radical departure among contemporary universities from the 'old' idea. According to Maskell and Robinson 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 — 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 Newmanesque 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 this book, 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 not wholly inaccurately be brought against Maskell and Robinson. Rather, my purpose in writing is to draw attention to a number of interrelated issues that are of considerable contemporary significance, to examine them in a sustained way and, 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.

Such a discussion (as I shall conduct it) is an exercise in two branches of philosophy — philosophy of education and applied philosophy. Interestingly, the recent history of both is singularly different. The philosophy of education, after a short lively period dominated by R.S. Peters, is in the doldrums. Even at its height, the philosophy of higher education never got much attention. By contrast, applied philosophy, the attempt to relate philosophical questions to social and moral issues, has flourished in recent years as never before. It has largely been concerned with ethical questions and with public issues related, in one way or another, to the question of social justice. Yet there is good reason to think, as I hope to show, that the traditional questions of philosophy of education, which have to do with learning, understanding, science, practical training and the value of knowledge, have important implications in the sphere of social policy with respect to higher education.

The task of exploring these implications is difficult for two reasons. Any discussion of the nature and conduct of universities at the present time runs 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. *The New Idea of a University* might plausibly be said by its critics to fall into the latter camp.

Yet these two views are caricatures of each other, and if serious thinking about universities and the policies which should govern them is to take place, it is essential that the straight-jacketed thinking this sort of dichotomy inevitably induces be abandoned. Both contemporary conditions and educational history are more complex than would favour either position — and hence the sort of thinking that needs to be done must be more complex too. 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 some-

what daunting. Yet it is at heart, in my view, philosophical, and it is questions in the philosophy of education which must make the running.

Such is the scope of these questions, however, that it is not possible to offer the last word on any of the topics under review. On the other hand, there is something to be said for sticking one's head above the parapet and offering the first word. I am firmly convinced that though the topics with which this book deals are philosophical, they are also of public importance, and I have attempted to relate the relatively abstruse to the relatively practical. This is the mark of 'applied' philosophy. I also think that they have not been addressed in a sustained or measured way, and that doing so might contribute something towards ameliorating the confusion and, indeed, malaise, by which life in contemporary British universities is marred. At any rate this is something reasonable to attempt.

Philosophy at its best is marked by clarity and rigour. There are topics that 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 is one of these. I hope that my professional mode of analytical thinking and writing has enabled me to preserve philosophy's intellectual virtues in the exploration of the many issues which I believe need to be addressed. If I have, the book 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.