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The Concept of a University: Theory, Practice, and Society

Trystan S. Goetze

The University of Sheffield

t.goetze@sheffield.ac.uk

Abstract

Current disputes over the nature and purpose of the university are rooted in a philosophical divide between theory and practice. Academics often defend the concept of a university devoted to purely theoretical activities. Politicians and wider society tend to argue that the university should take on more practical concerns. I critique two typical defenses of the theoretical concept—one historical and one based on the value of pure research—and show that neither the theoretical nor the practical concept of a university accommodates all the important goals expected of university research and teaching. Using the classical pragmatist argument against a sharp division between theory and practice, I show how we can move beyond the debate between the theoretical and practical concepts of a university, while maintaining a place for pure and applied research, liberal and vocational education, and social impact through both economic applications and criticism aimed at promoting social justice.

Keywords

universities – higher education – theory and practice – Pragmatism – John Dewey

1. Introduction

Recent challenges faced by universities—massive rises in enrolment combined with increasing requirements from governments to see concrete returns on their investment of public funds—

prompt reflection on our concept of a university. This reflection typically takes one of two forms. On the one hand, academics often imagine the ideal university to be an institution fully devoted to the pure pursuit of theoretical knowledge. On the other hand, politicians and other stakeholders often demand that the university provide more practical economic value to its students and society. Academics reply that the economic idea of a university threatens the continued existence of the institution; those outside counter that all social institutions must change with the times. The dialectic can seem intractable. But it is actually rooted in a false divide between theoretical and practical activities.

In this paper, I uncover the philosophical background of the contemporary debate over the concept of a university, criticize its underlying assumptions, and propose a new way forward. In §2, I describe the contemporary debate sur- rounding the concept of a university as fundamentally organized around the divide between theory and practice. Those on the side of the theoretical concept often invoke the history of the university in defense of their position. But, drawing on a comprehensive history of the university in Europe, I show that the same debate has surrounded universities since their inception. Turning to the history of the university thus fails to settle the debate on either side. In §3, I consider a second argument in favor of the theoretical concept, namely that purely theoretical activities, but not practical activities, have intrinsic value. I argue that even if we accept this view, the concept of a university it leaves us would toss out two further ends for university teaching and research: moral education and social criticism. Since, along with pure theoretical research, these two ends are also in tension with the practical concept of a university, I suggest moving beyond the division of theory and practice. One approach would be to follow Clark Kerr's concept of a 'multiversity,' but I argue that the internally inconsistent and quarrelsome university his idea promotes is unsatisfactory, and does

not really move us beyond the divide between theory and practice. Instead, I use an argument from classical pragmatism to show that the very divide between theory and practice is a philosophical fiction, and, in §4, I outline a new concept of the university, inspired by the philosophy of John Dewey, that synthesizes theoretical and practical scholarship and teaching. The Deweyan concept of a university moves past the intractable debate between theory and practice, affirms universities' unique place in 21st-century society, and removes the inconsistency and in-fighting described by Kerr as endemic to the multi- versity. §5 concludes by returning to the contemporary challenges faced by the university.

2. Theory vs. Practice

The debate over what the university is and what it should be tends to center around two competing concepts of the university. The first, which I call the *theoretical concept*, views a university as an institution dedicated to the pure pursuit of knowledge. This view is explicit in philosophical reflection on the subject. For example, A. Phillips Griffiths argues that the essential purpose of the university is scientific inquiry. The other things a university might do—e.g., education, entrepreneurship, policy development—are only accidental: 'these functions can be conceived as functions of the university only so far as they are dependent on the central function, the pursuit of learning.'[1] Following Griffiths, D. W. Hamlyn argues that the university is essentially an institution concerned with producing new specialized knowledge, and training the next generation of researchers.[2] This form of theoretical concept corresponds to the notion of a scientific research university developed during the Prussian reforms of Wilhelm von Humboldt

[1] A. Phillips Griffiths, 'A Deduction of Universities,' in Philosophical Analysis and Education, edited by Reginald D. Archambault, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), 187–207, at 195.
[2] D. W. Hamlyn, 'The Concept of a University,' Philosophy 71, iss. 276 (1996): 205–218.

and endorsed by the American educational reformer Abraham Flexner.[3] But the same kind of idea is reflected in the ideal of liberal education defended by John Henry Newman. Resisting the view of liberal studies as merely the capstone education of social elites, Newman lays particular emphasis on the importance of learning as an end in itself: 'Knowledge is, not merely a means to something beyond it, or the preliminary of certain arts into which it naturally resolves, but an end sufficient to rest in and to pursue for its own sake.'[4] While Newman opposed the Humboldtian model of higher education, his liberal university and the research university are united in their dedication to the study of theoretical knowledge as an end in itself.

The second concept of a university is what I call the *practical concept*. On this view, the university is conceived primarily in terms of its economic value: to prepare students for the workforce, to produce innovative technologies, to incubate entrepreneurial projects, and to produce scientific discoveries that are useful to government or industry. The practical concept is particularly popular among politicians. For example, during a 2015 Republican presiden- tial primary election debate, U.S. Senator Marco Rubio argued that the best way to raise wages would be to train more students in well-paying trades, re- marking, 'I don't know why we have stigmatized vocational education. Welders make more money than philosophers. We need more welders and less philosophers.'[5] In the U.K., government evaluations of the quality of research at

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[3] Abraham Flexner, Universities: American, English, German (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1930)

[4] John Henry Newman, The Idea of a University: Defined and Illustrated, edited by I. T. Ker (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1976), 103.

[5] For a video clip of this remark, see New Republic, 'Marco Rubio Says Welders Make More Than Philosophers,' YouTube, Nov 10, 2015, <https://youtu.be/HP7vOx1ZCHE>, accessed Mar 18, 2019. Rubio faced a great deal of criticism for these remarks, not least from several jour- nalists who pointed out that those with philosophy degrees tend to earn considerably more than welders; see Katie Sola, 'Sorry, Rubio, But Philosophers Make 78% More Than Weld- ers,' Forbes, Nov 11, 2015, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/katiesola/2015/11/11/rubio-welders- philosophers/>, accessed Apr 19, 2019; Matthew Yglesias, 'Philosophy majors actually earn a lot more than welders,' Vox, Nov 10, 2015 <https://www.vox.com/2015/11/10/9709948/marco- rubio-philosophy-welder/>, accessed Apr 19, 2019. Rubio has since changed his opinion of philosophy (apparently, after reading the Stoics), tweeting in March 2018 that 'We need both! Vocational training for workers & philosophers to make sense of the world,' Twitter, Mar 28, 2018, <https://twitter.com/marcorubio/status/978961956504788994>, accessed Apr 19, 2019.

universities increasingly emphasize the category of 'impact,' defined as: 'an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia.'[6] Academics in business schools also promote the practical concept. In a study of business ventures generated through the activities of professors and students at the University of Calgary, James Chrisman, Timothy Hynes, and Shelby Fraser argue that research and education at universities should be structured to reward and encourage economic development produced through these activities. They conclude that 'the government should begin to look at universities more as businesses in which it has made sizeable investments, rather than as social programs that drain dollars from its coffers.'[7]

The practical concept has been roundly criticized by academics in favor of the theoretical concept. This argument tends to have two parts: one in terms of the history of the university, and the other in terms of the value of the university's distinctive activities. For example, literary critic and intellectual historian Stefan Collini argues that when administrators and politicians view universi- ties as business investments expected to make economic returns, it reveals that they 'do not in the first place have an adequate conception of the activities they are trying to fund and regulate.'[8] On his view, the practical concept is a recent neoliberal imposition:

> In a climate where so much of the discussion of universities turns on questions of funding, it has come to seem almost inevitable that the only criterion for the expenditure of 'public money' assumed to command widespread acceptance... is the consumerist one of increased prosperity.[9]

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[6] Higher Education Funding Council, Scottish Funding Council, Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, and Department for Employment and Learning, 'Assessment Frame- work and Guidance on Submissions (ref 02.2011 Updated Version),' Jan 2012, <http://www. ref.ac.uk/2014/media/ref/content/pub/assessmentframeworkandguidanceonsubmissions/ GOS%20including%20addendum.pdf>, accessed Apr 19, 2019.

[7] James J. Chrisman, Timothy Hynes, and Shelby Fraser, 'Faculty Entrepreneurship and Eco- nomic Development: The Case of the University of Calgary,' Journal of Business Venturing 10 (1995): 267–81, at 281.

[8] Stefan Collini, What Are Universities For? (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 38.

[9] Ibid., 90.

We are driven to justify university activities in terms of their economic value, Collini claims, because of a change in political values since the mid-twentieth century. Universities used to be institutions devoted to the production of re- search, cultural works, and education, which are primarily valuable for their own sakes. The justification for public funding of these activities was originally in terms of the cultural value of these activities: more knowledge, art, and criticism simply enrich culture. Though these activities may also have economic or other practical benefits, to justify their continuation by reference to their practical value is at best misleading, at worst a 'trap' leading to further dwindling of support for the pure pursuit of knowledge.

Talbot Brewer casts the public debate over the place of vocational education in liberal arts universities along similar lines. He argues that this debate

> can be understood as a clash between scholarship in the ancient sense— which is to say thought unfolding in freedom, thought that does not take direction from anything alien to itself—and the contrary forms of thought that are appropriate when basic needs deprive human beings of the opportunity for more valuable uses of their defining mental capacities... The purpose of the servile arts is to keep oneself alive and healthy. The purpose of the liberal arts is to engage in activities that are worth- while in themselves, activities that can give point to remaining alive and healthy.[10]

On Brewer's view, the aim of a university education is to cultivate an appreciation for the kind of theoretical study that Aristotle presents as the best way for a human being to live.[11] A university that gives a significant place to vocational education is in direct opposition to the purpose of studying the liberal arts in general, and philosophy in particular. By aligning itself with the intrinsic value of theoretical study, the university stays true to its historical roots as an institution of learning.

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[10] Talbot Brewer, 'The Coup That Failed: How the Near-Sacking of a University President Exposed the Fault Lines of American Higher Education,' The Hedgehog Review 16, no. 2 (Summer 2014), <https://iasc-culture.org/THR/THR_article_2014_Summer_Brewer.php>, accessed Apr 19, 2019.

[11] Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, translated and edited by Terence Irwin, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1999), Book X.

However, there is reason to be skeptical of the merits of these arguments. I will attend to the historical argument first. The suggestion made by defenders of the theoretical concept is that the history of the university bears out its essential function as an institution devoted to the life of the mind—of theoretical study for its own sake. But when we attend closely to the history of the university, we find no clear support for either the theoretical or the practical concept. Instead, the history of the university is marked by oscillation between the two conceptions.

Though institutions of higher learning have existed in all civilizations since antiquity, the university appeared in Europe around the late eleventh to early thirteenth centuries.[12] The first universities in Bologna, Paris, and Oxford coalesced around communities of masters and students of theology, law, and medicine, with instruction offered in the arts as preparation for the 'higher' disciplines. Even though university graduates quickly dominated the religious and secular legal and administrative professions, university education in the Middle Ages remained focused on training students to become university teachers in their own right.[13] However, rulers and professionals soon began to argue that universities should change their curricula to be more directly relevant to the careers their graduates typically pursued. As historian Walter Rüegg observes: 'From the fourteenth century onwards the universities had to contend with the criticism that, with their scholastic method, they were not concerned with individual human beings and their concrete problems.'[14]

In the Renaissance, new humanistic ideals shifted the academic conception of the university in precisely this practical direction. As Rüegg describes, renewed interest in ancient

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[12] For reasons of space, this brief history is limited to the history of the university in Europe to the mid-twentieth century. I draw on the comprehensive four-volume A History of the University in Europe, published by Cambridge University Press, general editor Walter Rüegg.

[13] Peter Moraw, 'Careers of Graduates,' in A History of the University in Europe, Volume 1: Universities in the Middle Ages, edited by Hilde de Ridder-Symoens (Cambridge, UK: Cam- bridge University Press, 1992), 244–79.

[14] Walter Rüegg, 'Themes,' in A History of the University in Europe, Volume 4: Universities Since 1945, edited by Walter Rüegg (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 3–30, at 7.

authors was connected to a changed conception of the purpose of university teaching: 'Intellectual training was no longer intended to provide for the training of university teachers to the same extent as it had done in the Middle Ages; it was intended to a greater extent than ever before to form the minds of the wide circle of elites of the larger society.'[15] That is to say, universities shifted from a focus on knowledge for its own sake to knowledge that would be of use to a gentleman in a career in civil, ecclesiastic, or military service. This model was dominant well into the eighteenth century in Europe.

In the early nineteenth century, three types of university were in competition. The first was imposed by Napoleon's reforms. He introduced a state- controlled model of the university organized around the practical concept. Napoleonic universities were tightly regulated, with curricula tailored to meet the professional and administrative needs of the nation; research was restrict- ed to a small number of universities in Paris and the learned societies.[16] The second was Humboldt's research university, introduced as part of reforms developed in opposition to the Napoleonic model. On Humboldt's model, the universities were organized around specialized research activity, and students were primarily educated as researchers-in-training. The third was the liberal arts university defended by Newman, which retained the humanistic studies that had emerged in the Renaissance, reconceived as a program of study worth taking for its own sake, and not simply as the final training of a gentleman.

Humboldt's research-focused model became the most widely adopted, but the non-academic professions continued to view university credentials as a symbol of competence, contributing to the rise of the professional classes from the mid-nineteenth through early

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[15] Walter Rüegg, 'Themes,' in A History of the University in Europe, Volume 2: Universities in Early Modern Europe (1500–1800), edited by Hilde de Ridder-Symoens (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 3–42, at 8.

[16] Christophe Charle, 'Patterns,' in A History of the University in Europe, Volume 3: Universities in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries (1800–1945), edited by Walter Rüegg (Cam- bridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 33–80.

twentieth centuries.[17] Research universities found themselves competing for students with technical and professional schools, and applied fields such as engineering and agriculture became established in university departments. The student body's changing educational and vocational ambitions came as a shock to the academic establishment, as historian Christophe Charle explains:

> The new students, who were less likely to come from the educated middle classes than before, took a pragmatic view. Studying in order to earn a living... they had little sympathy for Humboldt's educational ideals and sought instead training for a particular career. This often led to misunderstandings with the professors, who were becoming ever more specialized in their particular fields and more remote from existing society.[18]

Research universities thus began to morph from institutions devoted to the pure pursuit of theoretical knowledge to schools providing the capstone education required for entry into the middle class. The massive rise in enrollment following the post-war baby boom only continued this trend.[19] However, a new development, from the mid-twentieth century to the present, is the increased emphasis by funding bodies and university administrations on applied science, entrepreneurial connections and knowledge exchange with external partners, and other forms of economic impact through research. As historian Notker Hammerstein explains, following the Second World War, the use of science in the development of 'new inventions and many alternative materials, improved transportation... the atom bomb and even space travel, taught people... just what far-reaching and lasting effects scientific research could have on modern life.'[20]

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[17] Konrad Jarausch, 'Graduation and Careers,' in A History of the University in Europe, Volume 3: Universities in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries (1800–1945), edited by Walter Rüegg (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 363–92.

[18] Charle, 'Patterns,' 58–9.

[19] Martin Trow, 'Problems in the Transition from Elite to Mass Higher Education' (Berkeley, CA: Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 1973).

[20] Notker Hammerstein, 'Epilogue: Universities and War in the Twentieth Century,' in A History of the University in Europe, Volume 3: Universities in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries (1800–1945), edited by Walter Rüegg (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 637–672, at 669.

Far from vindicating the theoretical concept, then, the history of the university shows that, at different times and in different places, both the theoretical and the practical concept have been the dominant view. The current debate in public discourse over whether university education and research should be oriented more toward the practical is just another swing of a pendulum that was set in motion shortly after the first universities appeared, for the debate is nearly as old as the university as an institution. There is thus reason to be skep- tical of claims such as that made by historian Willem Frijhoff that 'the university has constantly assimilated the changes of form and function required by its user groups in society, but *has preserved its feeling of identity unbroken*,'[21] if that feeling of identity is narrowly conceived along the theoretical concept of a university. But taking a wider view of that unbroken feeling of identity problematizes the status of the theoretical concept as the default position. We can- not take it for granted that the history of the university reveals the pure pursuit of knowledge without regard for application to be the essential function of the university.

3. Inconsistencies and Illusions

The second argument made by defenders of the theoretical concept is that this kind of university's characteristic activities—the production of knowledge and cultural works for their own sakes—are intrinsically valuable. In this section, I first critique this value-based argument, then argue that we should move past the divide between theory and practice that motivates the dispute in the first place.

As mentioned, Collini, Brewer, and others who defend the theoretical concept invoke the intrinsic value of theoretical study—of activities that aim solely at the production, preservation,

[21] Willem Frijhoff, 'Patterns,' in A History of the University in Europe, Volume 2: Universities in Early Modern Europe (1500–1800), edited by Hilde de Ridder-Symoens (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 43–112, at 47, emphasis mine.

and transmission of knowledge, with- out concern for practical application. The knowledge and culture produced by universities are simply valuable on their own, and need not be justified in terms of their applications or contributions to the economy. As Brewer notes explicitly, the dispute aligns with an ancient philosophical division between the theoretical and the practical. Aristotle, for example, contrasts practical activities, which always aim at further ends, with theoretical activities, which are ends in themselves:

> The activity of study aims at no end apart from itself, and has its own proper pleasure, which increases the activity. Further, self-sufficiency, leisure, unwearied activity (as far as is possible for a human being), and any other features ascribed to the blessed person, are evidently features of this activity. Hence a human being's complete happiness will be this activity.[22]

Similarly, Thomas Aquinas distinguishes between the liberal and the servile arts, the former being devoted to theoretical activity, and the latter to practical concerns:

> Works of the speculative reason are... called arts indeed, but 'liberal' arts, in order to distinguish them from those arts that are ordained to works done by the body, which arts are, in a fashion, servile, inasmuch as the body is in servile subjection to the soul, and man, as regards his soul, is free [*liber*].[23]

On the kind of view espoused by Aristotle and Aquinas, theoretical and practical activities exclude one another—one cannot at the same time engage in the self-sufficient activities of theory and the instrumental activities of practice. Moreover, since theoretical activities are not done for the sake of any instrumental aim, their value is intrinsic, while practical activities are valuable only insofar as they are a means to some further end. It is this division that motivates the entire history of the dialectic between the theoretical and practical concepts of a university.

Now, we could accept this divide, and admit, with Collini and Brewer, that the pure pursuit of knowledge and culture is an intrinsically valuable activity. We can even admit that this

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[22] Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1177b20–26.

[23] Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Beziger Bros., 1947), I-II, Q. 57, Art. 3, ad. 3.

suffices to show that governments ought to pro- vide adequate funding to support the continuation of these activities at universities, and leave it to other sectors to develop economic applications where they can. But this defense still overlooks some important activities that many take universities to be for. For example, liberal arts programs frequently present the moral education of young adults to be among their goals. While this goal may be intrinsically valuable, it is distinct from the aim of theoretical study for its own sake. The divide between theoretical and practical activities would force us to categorize it on the practical side, as something that might result from theoretical activities, and would be welcomed if it occurs, but which is not to be pursued directly at universities. Another example is social criticism: many in the humanities and social sciences take the goal of their research and teaching not just to be producing knowledge for its own sake, but specifically to advance the cause of social justice or other projects aimed at improving society. But as J. P. Powell observes, the theoretical concept is not clearly aligned with this aim. It is true that the theoretical university allows for inquiry into any and all subjects, producing a research environment that seems conducive to developing social criticism. But a university given over to the production of theoretical knowledge without concern for application 'does not support a wider conception of research and culture which encompasses the deployment of knowledge and understanding as a base for social criticism and action.'[24] So, if we accept the argument for the theoretical concept in terms of the intrinsic value of producing knowledge or cultural works, we might be able to resist the claims of the economically-driven practical concept, but we will lose other important functions of the university at the same time.

The practical concept, it is worth noting, does just as poorly at accommodating the value of moral education or social criticism as it does for theoretical inquiry. Recall that the practical

[24] J. P. Powell, 'Universities as Social Critics,' Higher Education 3 (1974): 149–56, at 152.

concept justifies the university's activities in terms of their contribution to economic value. This puts theoretical activities under threat, for they are undertaken without direct concern for application. But the practical concept is also in tension with the aims of moral education and social criticism. While these goals sometimes align with the production of economic value, the connection is not a necessary one. Profit, GDP, and employment figures may grow independently of these goods, and in some cases, economic advancement may be opposed to moral education or social criticism. For instance, criticizing the social structures that underpin stable but unequal economies, or the capitalist system itself, would be off-limits.

The shortcomings of both concepts suggest that we should move the debate beyond the division between theory and practice. There are two ways to do this. The first is to amalgamate the two concepts, along with the other activities characteristic of universities that do not fit under either concept. This approach is represented by the concept of a 'multiversity,' as outlined by economist and President of the University of California, Clark Kerr. The multiversity brings together the disparate activities and goals of university professionals under the same administration and infrastructure. It is, as Kerr says, a 'pluralistic' institution:

> It worshiped no single God; it constituted no single, unified community; it had no discretely defined set of customers. It was marked by many visions of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, and by many roads to achieve these visions; by power conflicts; by service to many markets and concern for many publics.[25]

While the different types of university based on the theoretical concept (medieval, liberal, and research universities) and the practical concept (Renaissance, Napoleonic, and entrepreneurial universities) are unified around their own particular purposes, the multiversity has no set agenda, no unifying purpose, and no firm commitment either to theory or to practice. Kerr compares the multiversity to a city. Within, there are many different communities and subcultures with

[25] Clark Kerr, The Uses of the University, 4th ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 103.

different values, interests, and projects, which may find themselves collaborating or competing with one another depending on their needs and goals and the available resources. What distinguishes the university from similarly complex social institutions is a preoccupation with producing knowledge (scientific, humanistic, and applied) and cultural works (artistic, critical, and religious), and disseminating it through education, publications, and external partnerships.

Kerr's multiversity gives priority to neither the theoretical nor the practical concept, allowing different departments and individuals within the university to organize their work around one or the other—or purposes that do not fit under either concept—as they like. However, he still considers theory and practice to be contrary kinds of activities. He explicitly describes the multiversity as internally inconsistent, marked by competition between the theoretical and practical factions, leaving it to the administrators to strike some form of balance between the two. Properly managed, the mixing of research and teaching dedicated, on the one hand, to the life of the mind as an end in itself, and, on the other hand, to practical applications of the arts and sciences in technology, business, or vocational training, should not threaten the existence of either.

But, as they remain opposing sides in a competition for resources, in times where political and social pressure pushes for more practical applications of knowledge, those on the theoretical side of the multiversity will inevitably find themselves on the defensive. Since those on the practical side stand to lose out if they stand in defense of their colleagues on the theoretical side, it is thus difficult to take Kerr seriously when he calls for a 'more unified intellectual world' in the same breath that he celebrates this competitive arrangement.[26] Without a unified institutional commitment to both, there will be no reason for those on the practical side

[26] Ibid., 89.

to advocate for those on the theoretical side when external pressures favor the practical. And while the goals of moral education can find a place in the multiversity (so long as they can win the necessary re- sources, of which there is no guarantee), social criticism still sits uneasily in this model of the university. An administration overseeing multifarious activities in competition with one another might tolerate some critical activities on campus, especially if they attract social capital in the form of respect and prestige among academics and financial capital from students interested in the courses of study that come out of critical work.[27] But, the multiversity's ad- ministration will resist efforts to criticize the status quo—the university's own institutional structures, or the social structures that support the university's arrangements with governments, its external partnerships, or its investments. Hence, Kerr himself, writing in 1963, is wary of the social criticism propounded by Marxist, feminist, and anti-racist scholars, and the student activism connected therewith: 'When the extremists get control of the students, the faculty, or the trustees with class warfare concepts, then the "delicate balance of interests" becomes an actual war.'[28]

Kerr's compromise does not fundamentally challenge the dialectic between theory and practice. The multiversity simply puts the debate between the two sides, and other potential conceptions of the university, under the same management. This merger is unsatisfactory. It would be better if we had a concept of the university that did not necessitate competition between theory, practice, and other goals of university teaching and research, such as moral education and social criticism. It would be better still if we could vindicate the place of each of these goals without retaining the multiversity's inconsistency and tension. This brings me to the

[27] I thank Josh Forstenzer for this point.
[28] Kerr, The Uses of the University, 30.

second approach to moving the dialectic past the divide between theory and practice: deny that the divide actually tracks a philosophically important distinction.

The separation of theoretical and practical activities is forcefully criticized in the pragmatist tradition; I will concentrate on John Dewey's form of the argument, here.[29] First, for the pragmatist, in order for theories to be meaningful, they must have some practical 'cash value.'[30] The typical illustration is scientific inquiry. As Dewey argues, the production of theoretical knowledge through science must proceed by way of practical action to test hypotheses through inquiry:

> The analysis and rearrangement of facts which is indispensable to the growth of knowledge and power of explanation and right classification cannot be attained purely mentally—just inside the head. Men have to do something to the things when they wish to find out something; they have to alter conditions.[31]

The point that all theory must be tested in practice is not limited to the natural sciences, however. Following Dewey, Elizabeth Anderson argues that, from a pragmatist perspective, moral theories must also be tested in practice by acting in accordance with them and considering whether we can live with the consequences.[32] Theoretical activities, whether they are scientific or philosophical, must involve some practical element, or else they are idle speculation. The notion that theoretical and practical activities are contraries is false.

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[29] While the aspects of Dewey's thought that I draw upon are expressed in various places throughout his corpus, I draw primarily upon his Democracy and Education, not only be- cause it is there that the connections between his pedagogy and philosophy are most clear, but also because, as Dewey himself later expressed, that work 'was for many years that in which my philosophy, such as it is, was most fully expounded'; see John Dewey, 'From Absolutism to Experimentalism,' in The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925–1953, Vol- ume 5: 1929–1930, Essays; The Sources of a Science Education; Individualism, Old and New; and Construction and Criticism, edited by Jo Ann Boydston and Kathleen E. Poulos (Car- bondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 147–160, at 156.

[30] This phrase comes from William James, Pragmatism, or, A New Word for Some Old Ways of Thinking, edited by Fredson Bowers and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 97.

[31] John Dewey, The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899–1924. Volume 9: 1916, Democracy and Education, edited by Jo Ann Boydston, Patricia R. Baysinger, and Barbara Levine (Carbon- dale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 284

[32] Elizabeth Anderson, 'Social Movements, Experiments in Living, and Moral Progress: Case Studies from Britain's Abolition of Slavery,' The Lindley Lecture 52 (University of Kansas, 2014), <http://hdl.handle.net/1808/14787>, 24.

Second, Dewey challenges the simple association of intrinsic value with theory and instrumental value with practice. Theoretical study may well be intrinsically valuable if it is pursued for its own sake, but activities traditionally considered to be practical—e.g. cooking, crafting, or running a business—may also be done for the sake of the activities themselves. As intrinsically valuable ends, theoretical and practical activities thus 'cannot (as intrinsic) be com- pared, or regarded as greater and less, better or worse.'[33] But, when we have a choice to make between different activities, we need to introduce some standard by which their value can be compared—and this makes each activity un- der consideration an object of instrumental value. For example, a writer may find both writing a philosophy paper and writing a magazine article to have intrinsic value—she finds the activity of writing, in whatever genre, valuable for its own sake. But when deciding between committing time to one or the other, instrumental concerns must come in, for instance: Which is more important to her career? Is she more in need of an academic publication for her CV or money from freelance work? Context is needed to establish whether any given theoretical or practical activity is intrinsically or instrumentally valuable.

If the divide between theoretical and practical activities is spurious, what accounts for its persistence? After all, as I showed above, the debate between the theoretical and practical concepts of the university has gone on for centuries. Dewey argues that the root of the divide is cultural, rather than philosophical. The social context in which the philosophical distinction between theory and practice was developed had a sharp division between the labor and leisure classes, with philosophers tending to be from the latter. This longstanding social division of those doing predominantly practical and predominantly theoretical work maintained the illusion that the activities themselves are contraries, and that theoretical activities, but not practical

[33] Dewey, Democracy and Education, 247.

activities, have intrinsic value. Dewey argues that in a truly democratic society, the division would be impossible to maintain, for such a society would be one 'in which all share in useful service and all enjoy a worthy leisure.'[34] While we are a long way off from this ideal, a commitment to democratic principles should unsettle the assumption that theory and practice are contrary activities.

As I argued, the root of the debate between the two concepts of a university I described is the divide between theory and practice as contrary kinds of activity. Kerr's multiversity aims to compromise between the two sides by allowing both to take place within the same organizational structure. But, as Dewey argues, the divide between theory and practice that motivates the dialectic is misguided. In the next section, I outline what our concept of a university might be if we abandon the notion of a strict divide between theory and practice.

4. Beyond Theory and Practice

Dewey observes that the divide between theory and practice manifests in the education system as a series of inconsistent compromises. On the one hand, sometimes subjects are taught as preparation for studying them at an advanced level for their own sakes; on the other hand, sometimes they are taught with an eye only to their practical economic value. The two sides of the com- promise stem from the two sides of the dialectic between theory and practice in education. The same kind of inconsistency and compromise appears in Kerr's multiversity. But, as Dewey argues, once we see that the putative divide between theory and practice is misguided, a different image of education emerges: 'If we had less compromise and resulting confusion...we might find it easier to construct a course of study which should be useful and liberal at the same

[34] Ibid., 265.

time.'[35] In this section, I use Dewey's philosophy of education to outline a concept of the university that moves beyond the dialectic between theory and practice. There are three aspects to the pragmatist concept of a university that I propose: (1) the kind of education offered at the university, (2) the activi- ties of university teachers and researchers, and (3) the university's wider role in society.

4.1. University Education

Dewey's account of education is based on his account of experience. On his view, experience has both active and passive sides:

> On the active hand, experience is trying—a meaning which is made ex- plicit in the connected term experiment. On the passive, it is undergoing. When we experience something we act upon it, we do something with it; then we suffer or undergo the consequences. We do something to the thing and then it does something to us in return.[36]

In order to learn from experience, the agent has to understand the connection between what she does and the consequences that result as she continues her activity. Dewey illustrates this with a simple example. If a child sees a flame and sticks its finger into it, unless the child understands the subsequent pain as the result of its movements in response to the flame, the feeling of pain is just some misfortune. Understanding the connection between the passive see- ing of the light, the active touching of the flame, and the passively felt pain that follows, is needed to learn from this experience—specifically, to learn that touching the flame produces pain.

Education consists in the growth of experience, in both quantity and quality, as the student actively pursues a variety of aims of interest to her. As a result, the student learns how to act in a variety of situations in order to bring about a variety of outcomes—the student acquires habits. It is important, however, that habits do not become too fixed: 'Habits reduce themselves

[35] Ibid., 267.
[36] Ibid., 146.

to routine ways of acting, or degenerate into ways of action to which we are enslaved just in the degree in which intelligence is disconnected from them.'[37] That is to say, the student must remain open to new experiences that challenge the connections she has already learnt, so that she may continue to learn from experience instead of remaining stuck in old habits that do not serve her well in some situations.

Dewey's experiential account of education removes the division between purely theoretical and purely practical learning. Since learning must take place through the making of connections between one's actions and their results, all learning has a practical element. But at the same time, making those connections, and making further connections between one's present experience and what one has previously learned, leads to more abstract and general knowledge that constitutes theory. By basing education on experience, theory emerges from and finds application in practice. Purely practical education would be simply acquiring habits by rote—e.g., learning a trade but without fully grasping that industry's broader effects. Purely theoretical education would be de- void of any connection to experience outside the classroom—e.g., learning to solve an equation without understanding the uses of that mathematical activity. The ideal of education, on Dewey's account, would always have theory and practice mixed.

A concept of the university that rejects the theory and practice divide would be aligned with this experiential approach to education, instead of the inconsistent mix described by Kerr. The division of theory and practice makes the separation of vocational studies from liberal studies seem to track an important distinction, as Brewer expresses in his criticism of practically-minded re- forms at liberal arts colleges. But it is exactly this idea, 'that a truly cultural or liberal education cannot have anything in common, directly at least, with industrial affairs,'[38] that

[37] Ibid., 53.
[38] Ibid., 266.

Dewey's account of education enables us to resist. Subjects that are primarily concerned with practical applications would become opportunities for learning scientific and humanistic studies that are tradition- ally treated as worthy of study intrinsically. They would not be relegated to 'breadth' requirements disconnected from students' interests, but integrated into their subjects of study. Going the other way, the practical justification of subjects traditionally presented as purely theoretical studies would no longer be a 'trap' that draws us away from the true value of these subjects and towards mere economic value, as Collini fears. A Deweyan approach to teaching these subjects would encourage students to find connections between their own interests and activities and the more abstract and general subjects, deepening their appreciation for theoretical study and finding practical value of a broader sort than job skills. We can thereby also resist the notion that 'the education which is fit for the masses must be a useful or practical education in a sense which opposes useful and practical to nurture of appreciation and liberation of thought,'[39] as expressed in Rubio's remarks about vocational education. The aim is not more welders and fewer philosophers, but more welders with ap- preciation for and interest in philosophy, and vice versa.

4.2. University Teachers and Researchers

The role of the teacher, on Dewey's account, is to facilitate the student's having of educative experiences. Lessons are designed with the student's background experience in mind, so as to draw upon but also challenge the connections and habits the student has already learnt. The teacher sets up conditions so that the desired ways of acting and undergoing occur to the student, and by 'making the individual a sharer or partner in the associated activity so that he feels its success as his success, its failure as his failure.'[40] The school, of which the university is one kind,

[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid., 18.

is a special place set up to effect these experiences. The student's experiences in and out of school form a closed loop: her prior experi- ence and interests form the basis for her experience in the classroom, which she then connects to further experiences outside the classroom, which form the basis for her next classroom experience.

Of course, university teachers do more than just education. One element that makes universities distinct from other educational institutions, which is consistent across the entire history of the university, is that university teachers are themselves experts in their subjects, who are typically able to produce new works in their specialized fields. On the theoretical concept, university researchers' interests are limited to the production of new knowledge for its own sake, and the training of future researchers. Similarly, teachers who are not themselves researchers are concerned, on the theoretical concept, only with transmitting existing knowledge and cultivating an appreciation of its intrinsic value. On the practical concept, researchers are concerned with subjects of study that have economic value in their applications, and teaching is geared primarily towards vocational studies. On the pragmatist concept, by contrast, the university teacher would not just transmit their knowledge to the student, but work with the student to find activities that spark the student's interest in the subject, leading to projects that may be valuable to both the researcher's field and to applications in the student's life. The student's education becomes a component of the researcher's ongoing work to advance her field and to develop applications of research.

A worry might be raised at this point that the pragmatist concept of a university I am proposing maintains no space for research undertaken not for some specific application but for no reason other than to advance our knowledge.[41] Dissolving the divide between theory and

[41] I thank Philipp Rau for pushing me on this point.

practice, the objection goes, is to force all research to be applied. But this is mistaken. Recall that part of the argument for the dissolution of the divide between theory and practice was to reveal that activities traditionally classified as each may be pursued as intrinsically valuable activities. While Dewey concentrates on ways this realization enables us to revaluate practical activities, it also implies that the pursuit of knowledge without having immediate applications in view may still be undertaken as an activity worthy in itself. Thus, the pragmatist concept of a university can leave space for the pursuit of research or art simply for the sake of expanding the range of collective human experience. Where students also wish to pursue subjects for their own sake, the university teacher would guide the student through the practical activities involved in producing research in that discipline, similar to the Humboldtian model of education. But at the same time, in advancing the knowledge and experience that are collectively available, 'pure' research has the potential for improving the range of connections we can uncover in experience. Drawing on a more detailed and elaborate body of knowledge in interpreting the connections between our activities and their consequences enables us to learn more from experience. And when we seek to solve a practical problem, turning to a more developed range of specialized research improves our development and implementation of a solution to that problem. The pragmatist concept of a university can thus take on the classic line that pure research should be undertaken because applications of knowledge sometimes cannot be predicted beforehand—while also maintaining, without inconsistency, that such research is also valuable for its own sake.

4.3. The University in Society

Dewey also views educational institutions as serving an important role in society. On the one hand, schools enable the transmission of the experiences a society takes to be important: 'there is the necessity that... immature members [of a society]... be initiated into the interests, purposes,

information, skill, and practices of the mature members: otherwise the group will cease its characteristic life.'[42] At the same time, the relatively controlled environment of the school also serves to sieve out undesirable features of society: 'as a society be- comes more enlightened, it realizes that it is responsible not to transmit and conserve the whole of its existing achievements, but only such as will make for a better future society.'[43] Educational institutions thus serve both to preserve and to change their societies.

On the theoretical concept of a university, the institution is barely connected to its surrounding society. Its members produce new knowledge and cultural works, which may in the end find application or influence, but the job of the university starts and ends with the production of these works and the training of the next generation of researchers. It is up to others to develop applications. By contrast, the pragmatist concept of a university views the institution as embedded within its society. The knowledge its members produce and transmit is not something properly belonging to the theoreticians, but to all of society. University education serves to preserve that collective inheritance of knowledge. Furthermore, while university researchers may be interested to a greater or lesser extent in applications of their work, the university as an institution would serve as an intermediary in this respect, for example, through the work of professionals in knowledge mobilization.

On the practical concept of a university, all university activities must be undertaken with the aim of economic usefulness. Research is always done with a specific application in mind, or in collaboration with its end users, or else a research program must eventually find some application or risk defunding. Teaching is focused on training students to assume their roles in the work- force, and ideally responds to present and predicted economic demand so as not to

[42] Dewey, Democracy and Education, 6.
[43] Ibid., 24.

produce a surplus or deficit of qualified workers in any given industry. The pragmatist concept of a university, by contrast, takes a broader view of practical application that is not limited to economic concerns. One example is to develop students' moral character by studying important literary and philosophical texts in connection with doing volunteer work for community projects. This ambition is not reducible to mere economic value, but nor is it the result of the activity of theoretical study without concern for practice. The pragmatist concept of a university is thus in the best position to incorporate moral education alongside other socially valuable aims.

Finally, with regard to social criticism, the pragmatist concept of a university does not share the limitations of the theoretical concept, practical concept, or the multiversity. As alluded to earlier, the pragmatist view of inquiry applies not just to the generation of scientific knowledge, but also to the critique of moral principles. Moreover, because its research and education maintain their ties to lived experience and practical problems, social issues such as injustice, problematic values, and harmful policies are within the ambit of the pragmatist university's activities. The pragmatist concept of a university thus presents a model that better serves the role of universities as social critics than either the theoretical concept or the practical concept.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have presented the debate over the concept of a university as aligned along the divide between theoretical and practical activities. I critiqued two arguments in favor of the theoretical concept, showing that the history of the university does not support the theoretical concept as the default position, and that even if we accept that purely theoretical activities are intrinsically valuable, the theoretical concept does not capture all the important goals of university education and research. I then suggested moving beyond the theory vs. practice

dialectic. Kerr's multiversity attempts to do so by putting the two sides under the same roof, but the internally competitive model he introduces is unstable and inhospitable to critical research. Using arguments from pragmatist philosophy to dissolve the divide between theory and practice, I proposed a concept of the university based on Dewey's philosophy of education that overcomes the shortcomings of the theoretical concept, practical concept, and the concept of a multiversity.

I contend that a pragmatist concept of a university can better meet the challenges and expectations universities presently face. The expansion of enrollment and demand for concrete returns from government funding are sources of lament for the theoretical university. A smaller proportion of the student body than ever before is interested in the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, and pure research is threatened by demand for applications. The practical concept addresses students' desire for a useful education and government demand for impactful research. But its narrow concern with potential contributions to the economy is problematic. By viewing students as mostly workers- in-training, it limits their educational choices, is still rooted in an elitist division of society between the labor and leisure classes, and loses sight of the intrinsic value of theoretical activities. Moreover, it simply confirms the worry that pure research will be swept away. By contrast, the pragmatist university allows for a combination of liberal and vocational education, pure and applied research, and economic and critical social impact, without necessitating competition between them. The growth towards a system of universal higher education aligns with the democratic principles that underlie this idea of a university. Its commitment to education that students find both useful and intrinsically valuable readily accommodates their diverse interests. The pragmatist university also leaves space for pure research while at the same time developing concrete applications as a matter of course. All of

these activities would be united under the same goal of advancing human experience through higher education. But of course, all this remains to be tested—in lived experience.[44]

[44] 44 This paper is based on work I started in my M.A. thesis at the Department of Social Justice Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, and later refined in a presentation at the 2015 Sheffield Summer Philosophy Seminar. For their thoughtful comments, which substantially improved the paper at different stages of its development, I am thankful to Eric Bredo (my M.A. supervisor), Leesa Wheelahan, Lauren Bialystok, Shadi Afshar, Neil Williams, Josh Black, Philipp Rau, Josh Forstenzer, and the editors and an anonymous reviewer for this issue. This project was supported by an Ontario Graduate Scholarship from the Ontario Government and the University of Toronto, and a University Prize Scholarship from the University of Sheffield. I also want to thank my partner, Kat, for supporting me during my period of unemployment following my Ph.D., when this paper took its final form.