**A Critical Appraisal of the Philosophy of University and its Debates**

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**Abstract**

There are polarized debates about the philosophy of universities: universities are places where knowledge, that can solve a certain practical problem, is produced and disseminated on one hand and they are places where knowledge is produced and disseminated irrespective of its use value on the other. We conclude that the mission of universities cannot be separated from the intrinsic pursuit of knowledge and truth so long as such a pursuit is based on scientific evidence.

**Keywords**: Philosophy of universities, Instrumentalist epistemology, disinterested pursuit, intellectual excellence, higher education

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## Introduction

The philosophy[[1]](#footnote-1) of university is introduced based on the aspiration that we do not have sufficient and complete knowledge of our world, so we need a place where we realize such aspiration. Accordingly, a university is a repository where people can freely contemplate and apprehend the truth in scientific terms. This does not mean that there is a common consensus regarding what the philosophy of university education ought to be. Rather, there are two major opposing debates.

This paper attempts to give, first, an overview of the overall goals of universities by reviewing the two common clashing approaches; and second, it attempts to make a synthesis of the debates made *vis-à-vis* the philosophy of universities. In order to achieve this, we reviewed the literature on both sides. Accordingly, the first major approach, in relation to clarifying and articulating the purpose of universities, subscribes to a disinterested pursuit[[2]](#footnote-2) of knowledge and truth irrespective of its immediate use value. It argues that a university is a repository where people, who are primarily interested in intellectual and moral excellence, are gathered. The second approach, on the other hand, upholds that the philosophy of universities should be oriented towards producing knowledge that can solve practical problems. In other words, it argues that knowledge, which is produced by universities via research or any other means, should be measured to the degree that is capable of generating an immediate use value or utility.

The objective of this paper, thus, is to give a vivid picture of the philosophical debates, which are dichotomized into two major contradictory assumptions, made on what the philosophy of universities ought to be and then try to create a more or less moderate approach between the two. In rectifying these two major polarizations, a significant effort has been done in the relevant literature in both areas and addressed as follows.

## An Overview of the Philosophy of Universities

At this point, it is worth noting Aristotle’s understanding of the notion of *telos* or purpose when he argued that “every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and choice, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason, the good has rightly been declared to be at which all things aim” (quoted in Qing, 2008, p. 13). For Aristotle, the good is something in which everything else is done for the sake of attaining it. Thus, the activity of mankind is guided by and is aimed at attaining a certain implicit or explicit *telo*s. In the same vein, it is logical to argue that a university, as it is stated by Post (2003), “exists for the sake of carrying outcertain noble functions” or ends. Each member of the faculty and the departments of the university are therefore the “servants of those ideal ends” (p. 3).

Moreover, it is not unnatural for a man to crave knowledge. This is due to, the fact that “knowledge is a fundamental human need. All people desire knowledge and understanding. To make mistakes and to be deceived is seen as ‘an evil and a disgrace’” (quoted in Marginson, 2008, p. 2). This implies, Jaspers (1959) suggests, that “the idea of university derives its educational force from the primary human will to know”; and there is also another cardinal and higher purpose of mankind that “the world wants to be understood*”* (p. 53). Besides, there is, Botsford (1998) states, a claim that we do not have complete knowledge of this world, and there are certain scholarly methods that can be used to increase that knowledge. Therefore, University, Jaspers (1959) asserts, “is the corporate realization of man's basic determination to know” (p. 2). In other words, it is a repository where people, who have dedicated their lives to the quest and transmission of truth and knowledge, are allowed to congregate for the realization of such a thirst and hunger for knowledge. After all, the quest for knowledge is a unique feature of human beings since “man alone among all other beings considers himself human only so long as he involves himself in the process of knowledge” (ibid).

## 2.1 Debates on the Philosophy of University

University, as it is stated above, like any other institution, has its own missions or goals that need to be realized in its day-to-day endeavor. However, “notwithstanding the various historical developments that, directly or indirectly, affect the nature of university education or educational advancement in general”, Setargew (2003) argues, “there have been heated discussions on what the philosophy of university education ought to be” (p 36). Despite the presence of this debate on what the philosophy of a university education ought to be, there is, at least, a consensus that “an institution” such as a university “remains functional only so long as it vitally embodies its inherent idea. Should its spirit evaporate, an institution will petrify into something merely mechanical, like a soulless organism reduced to dead matter” (Habermas & Blazek, 1987).

Although there is a consensus that takes universities as institutions where knowledge is produced, mainly through research, and disseminates the product, mainly via teaching and publication, there is no agreement on what kind of knowledge universities ought to pursue. Put simply, there is a long-standing and entrenched debate on whether universities ought to be oriented towards producing knowledge that can result in immediate utility or pursuing knowledge irrespective of its use value. The next topic clearly navigates these polarized debates.

**2.1.1 The disinterested pursuit of knowledge**. The idea of university changes with the passage of time reflecting the dynamic variations in philosophical thoughts, and social, cultural, and political circumstances. However, there are still prominent scholars and philosophers of education who speak in terms of the philosophy of university education. The list includes John Hennery Newman, Wilhelm Von Humboldt, Karl Jaspers, José Ortega y Gasset, Allan Bloom, William Bostock, and Clark Kerr. These scholars focus, mainly, on the disinterested quest for knowledge, i.e., arguing for pushing forward the frontiers of knowledge irrespective of its immediate use value.

Newman (1852), who is thought to be the first person to analyze and clarify the ideals of university education in a modern and sophisticated way, relates that “… *the end cannot be divided from that knowledge itself*. *Knowledge is capable of being its own end.* Such is the constitution of the human mind, that any kind of knowledge, if it is really such, is its own reward (p. 128, emphasis is added). For Newman, the university should aim at liberal education in the sense that it ought to be directed at cultivating or disciplining of the mind.

 He relates: “… Liberal Education, viewed in itself, is simply the cultivation of the intellect, as such, and its object is nothing more or less than intellectual excellence” (Newman, 1852, p.147). When clarifying the objects of the intellect,in turn, Newman added that *“*truth of whatever kind is the proper object of the intellect; its cultivation then lies in fitting it to apprehend and contemplate truth*”* (Newman, 1852, p. 180). The upshot of Newman’s argument is that universities are simply centers of a disinterested pursuit of knowledge or intellectual excellence.

For Karl Jaspers (1959), a university is a place where man has the liberty to search for truth and knowledge and to teach it irrespective of its immediate use value:

To be permeated by the idea of the university is part of a way of life. It is the will to search and seek without limitation, to allow reason to develop unrestrictedly., to have an open mind, to leave nothing unquestioned, to maintain truth unconditionally, yet recognizing the danger of *sapere aude* (dare to know) (p.68).

Like Newman, Jaspers argued in stark contrast to the mere utilitarian understanding of the role of university education when he asserts that “all the university recognizes is responsibility to truth. *This struggle for truth must not be confused with a struggle for economic existence. It occurs on the level of disinterested investigation*” (Jaspers, 1959, p. 63; emphasis is added). Accordingly, Jaspers went on to argue, we pursue knowledge for its own sake “a passion whose self-affirmation remains the permanent premise of all science” (ibid).

Bloom (1987) has also dealt with the philosophy or ideals of university education. For him, university is not an institution that can be used for a rudimentary and mere utilitarian purpose of gratifying economic needs. He argues that university’s mission transcends this narrow utility rather it aims at a disinterested pursuit of knowledge. Such cardinal purpose of universities, as it is propounded by Bloom (1987), is vividly stated in what Bloom has felt when he visited the university of Chicago at his teen age:

When I was fifteen years old I saw the University of Chicago for the first time and somehow sensed that I had discovered my life. I had never before seen, or at least had not noticed, buildings that were evidently dedicated to a higher purpose, not to necessity or utility, not merely to shelter or manufacture or trade, but to something that might be an end in itself (p. 243).

This entails that the philosophy of university education is nothing other than a disinterested quest for truth and knowledge; and this pursuit should be treated as an intrinsic end.

The other scholar and philosopher, who is known for his exposition of the philosophy of university, is Wilhelm Von Humboldt. For him, the idea of university is characterized by “mission interplay” whereby teaching and research are inseparable for exercising one informs the other. Also, the academic are free to teach and conduct research as they wished; and students need to be seen as mature and self-directed persons. For Humboldt, since teaching and research usually involve critically approaching the received wisdom and authority; and since universities “conceive of science and scholarship as dealing with ultimately inexhaustible tasks: it means they are engaged in an unceasing process of inquiry” quoted in Marginson, 2008, p. 3), universities ought to be granted academic freedom in undertaking these activities.

The idea is that there is no limit to knowledge and the search for truth is continuous for it is not the nature of man to be satisfied by the knowledge he has at present. Rather, since we are living in a world that is dynamic and constantly changing accompanied by problems of different types, man must attempt to grapple with and address these problems. For this cardinal goal to be realized, man has to be engaged in a continuous process of curiosity, inquiry, knowledge production and dissemination. Humboldt, who was thought to be the one who had instigated university reform in Germany by establishing the University of Berlin, argues that “knowledge should be cultivated for its own sake and not its uses” (Marginson, 2008, p. 3) and it is the task of universities to be engaged in this rationale.

Bostock (2002) has also introduced the notion of ‘parameters of academic acceptability’, which is conceptually similar, if not identical, with the notion of the philosophy of university when he argues that for a university to qualify as a university, it must function within certain ‘parameters of academic acceptability’ which is nothing other than “the pursuit of truth and the provision of intellectual and moral leadership” (p. 22).

Kerr, as it is succinctly summed up by Bernstein (2012), has also introduced the notion of “multiversity” and he asserted that the multiversity, which is presumed to pursue multiple roles, is primarily aimed at addressing the threefold missions of teaching, research, including public service. For Kerr, knowledge function, like Newman and others, is central to higher education: it is “the prime material around which activity is organized ...Knowledge materials, and advanced ones at that, are at the core of any higher education system’s purposes and essence” (Gumport, 2000, p. 81-82).

Generally speaking, historically, the ideals of universities, according to Scott (2006), can be teaching and scholasticism - characterizing European medieval universities; nationalization (service to the government of the nation-state) – characterizing early modern universities of Europe and Latin America; democratization (service to the individual of the nation-state)- characterizing the U.S. universities of the 19th century; research and academic freedom- characterizing the 19th-century Humboldtian university; public service (service to the public of the nation-state) – featuring the 20th-century modern American university, and even internationalization (service to the body of nation-states) – featuring the current globalized universities.

**2.1.2 Instrumentalist epistemology**. It is not uncommon, especially in the era of the current consumerist society, to hear the admonition that universities, including the knowledge they produce, should be engaged in areas that deem to be productive – properly so called ‘instrumentalist epistemology.’ Put simply, disciplines, according to ‘instrumentalist epistemology’, that generate income is valuable while disciplines that produce little or no income are relegated as useless. This practice has created an environment where “Higher Education has entered into a state of being so highly corporative that market forces now reign supreme over the fundamental tenet of higher education.… (quoted in Park, 2011, p. 92). Under this scenario, the effectiveness of higher education institutions is determined according to market forces and principles. Hence, knowledge is valued by its use value.

In the meantime, as Gumport (2000) noted, “there has emerged a paradigm shift in the sense that the dominant legitimating idea of public higher education has been changed from the popular ideal of higher education as a social institution, then moving toward the idea of higher education as an industry or corporation” (p. 70). Accordingly, it developed a perception that colleges and universities are seen as one sector of a country’s economy resembling quasi-corporate entities, firms, or businesses that produce and sell a wide variety of goods and services in a competitive marketplace– universities, for instance, are expected to conduct research that would generate income.

The overriding principles of economic theories prescribe that organizations, such as universities, should function mainly based on the values of ‘economic rationality.’ Accordingly, “the main services of teaching and research”, within a university setting, “are variously supplied and priced to correspond to laws of supply and demand where students, parents, state legislatures, employers, and research funders are seen as customers” (Gumport, 2000, p. 71-72). The principles of demand and supply and the corresponding cost-benefit analysis, critics say, however, stands in direct opposition to the traditional and popular ideals of university – the intrinsic pursuit of knowledge i.e. producing knowledge irrespective of its use value.

These days, therefore, most universities started to be influenced by the thinking of a consumerist society where universities are squeezed into job training institutions – jobs that are perceived to be rewarding in terms of salary thereby assuring mainly economic/material welfare. In the meantime, Chachage (2006) declaims that important ideals of the university such as creativity, scientific inquiry, integrity in the pursuit of truth, and intellectual freedom are significantly constrained when job markets and markets in general reign supreme over the popular ideals of universities.

Moreover, the perception and practice of higher education as a social institution and/or centers of liberal learning is hardly possible in an environment where, according to Nicolescu (2009), market theories and principles are gradually now being used and applied by many universities (p. 37); and market principles or systems are “held to have inherent means for achieving the most cost-effective delivery of a service” (Bridges & Jonathan, 2003) – a dangerous watershed in undermining the popular/traditional missions of universities – pursuit of truth and pushing forward the frontiers of knowledge irrespective of its use value.

This, however, does not mean that universities do not need finance and the immediate and practical applicability of the produced knowledge. Rather, it is to mean that since knowledge is a universal concept and exists everywhere, discriminating the exploration of knowledge based on the criteria of practical[[3]](#footnote-3) utility (use value) undermines and narrows down the frontiers of knowledge. After all, since we cannot be certain about which knowledge will be practically applicable and beneficial to society in the future, “no corner of knowledge should remain unexplored” (Gumport, 2000, p. 84). Moreover, “knowledge is without limit, constructed in the individual by the individual and simultaneously connected to all other things in the universe. True knowledge and learning cannot be standardized or controlled” (Bevel, 2008, p. 11); and even “universities are developed as educational freemarkets” (Botsford; 1998, p. 5).

Therefore, a better imperative regarding the relationship between market theories (or economic principles) and university education ought to be “not that universities do not need money or that they should not try to get it” (quoted in Levine, 2006, p. 5). Instead, it is to mean that universities “should have an educational policy and then try to finance it, instead of letting financial accidents determine their educational policy” (quoted in Levine, 2006). An approach in measuring knowledge merely based on its use value disregards the best admonition of Pendley (2008) who asserts that “just as the obligation to feed the body must be met in order for the body to grow, there are certain obligations which, if met, feed the growth of the soul”, too (p.134).

## Conclusion: Synthesizing[[4]](#footnote-4) the Philosophy of Universities

So far, the debate between the disinterested pursuit of knowledge and instrumentalist epistemology has been clearly explored. From this debate, one can easily infer that the missions of universities vary according to the specific context within which they are operating. Despite the variations of the missions that universities aim to actualize, there is an underpinning that there, Setargew (2003) relates, should be at least one key and resilient feature that uniquely defines universities irrespective of their context:

Among these, the fact that university education should aim at knowledge for its own sake, to put it in a very concise and telling manner, that a university should be a center of excellence must be the quintessential feature that makes a university a university (p. 36-37).

It is imperative to clearly specify the type of excellence we are referring when we claim that universities should be the center of excellence for it is not uncommon to talk about excellences of different types such as excellence in deriving horses well, excellence of a physician in treating a patient well, excellence in playing flute well, etc. In the same vein, education in general and university education, in particular, has to be destined to discipline the intellectual, moral, and spiritual aspects of the learner in addition to developing the entrepreneurial and technical skills of the learner.

Universities are places where people question and understand their true selves including the purpose of life for university, as it is quoted in Jaspers (1959), is “a place where man must be allowed to find himself through authentic thinking and living, ‘away from the customary modes of speaking, from conventions and the playing of parts away from all that is mere foreground and surface’” (p. xvii). Hence, the university is/should be a place where the learner can understand, first, himself/herself and the purpose of life and existence and then, understand the external environment in general – a movement from self-knowledge (inward looking) to the knowledge of the external world (outward-looking).

This cardinal goal of the university is a direct derivative of the very purpose of education which is nothing other than ‘the cultivation of the total human being’ and ‘the flowering’ he frequently spoke of required what he called ‘the awakening of intelligence;’ that is, a capacity to discover the truth, find meaning and values, and live with a certain ‘goodness’” (Forbes, 1999, p. 5-6). Realizing such rationale, however, would be difficult when we measure knowledge to the degree that it produces immediate use value – knowledge that earns income or realizes the economic/material desire of the learner.

Also, measuring knowledge only in terms of its immediate use value, and economic rationality is tantamount to degrading and dehumanizing the unique essence of man i.e., thinking specifically genuine humanistic thinking since such an approach gives precedence for “the sanctity of profit” over “the sanctity of human life” (Pendley, 2008, p. 133).

This does not mean that realizing the material desires such as economic well-being/capability of individuals is not useful. Rather, it is to mean that trying to discriminate knowledge while, sometimes, we believe that it fails to assure such material desire is antithetical to both the definition of a university, where it is the center of a universal body of knowledge and the essential meaning of the learner (man/woman), i.e., thinking or proper thinking (critical, moral and spiritual).

It is to mean that education is predominantly targeted at producing not only professionals in different disciplines but also produce graduates who are humane - individuals who are morally and spiritually matured. Professionals who are devoid of moral and spiritual qualities would be detrimental not only to the community but also, in the long run, to themselves for they are mainly extrinsically, not intrinsically[[5]](#footnote-5), driven beings. After all, educational aim, such as university education, according to Dewey (2004), should be founded upon the intrinsic, unlike extrinsic or instrumental ones, activities, and needs (p. 116); and “there is truth in the saying that *education must first be human and only after that professional*” (Dewey, 2004, p. 207). This argument substantiates Newmanseqean understanding of the role of liberal education – the intrinsic pursuit of knowledge and the then cultivation of the intellect. However, he added, what is intrinsically good is also useful. Here, we need to be precise and concede the practical benefits, of instrumentalist epistemology, although indirectly, of university education by echoing the ideas of Newman and Setargew:

A great good will impart great good. If then the intellect is so excellent a portion of us, and its cultivation so excellent, it is not only beautiful, perfect, admirable, and noble in itself, but in a true and high sense *it must be useful to the possessor and to all around him*; not useful in any low, mechanical, mercantile sense, but as diffusing good, or as a blessing, or a gift, or power, or a treasure, first to the owner, then through him to the world. *I say then if a liberal education be good, it must necessarily be useful too* (quoted in Setargew, 2003, p. 40; Newman, 1852, p.193; emphasis added).

The idea is that one cannot deny the practical benefits of higher education and the produced knowledge thereof. After all, it is hardly possible, we believe, to have knowledge that is not useful in the long run if not in the short run. The difference is that some knowledge has an immediate utility, and some others have a benefit in the long run.

Moreover, we have to know that the utilitarian and instrumentalist role of universities might be derived indirectly from the direct pursuit of knowledge irrespective of its use value for *“intellectual culture is its[university] own end*; for *what has its end in itself*, has *its use in itself* also...” (quoted in Marginson, 2008, p. 2). It follows that “universities combine utilitarian and non-utilitarian outcomes*.* It is not either/or” (ibid, p. 3) – rightly so-called *synthesis*. This synthesis, we argue, is imperative for, first, it allows the positive role of other alternatives by avoiding the false dichotomy; and second, discriminating knowledge based on its immediate use value is detrimental for no one knows, for sure, which knowledge would be useful in the future.

What is imperative is, therefore, to appropriate the good sides of both options. Similarly, the two opposing approaches of university ideals, the disinterested pursuit of knowledge and instrumentalist epistemology, should be, though indirectly, pursued simultaneously for both ideals have their own strengths in addition to drawbacks.

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1. In this article, we have used the term philosophy as an equivalent, in the broad sense of the term, notion with the word essence though these two terms are not exactly the same. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In this context we used this term to refer only to the mere pursuit of knowledge for achieving primarily the intellectual, moral, and spiritual aspects of man. In other words, the focus is not on producing knowledge that would result in ensuring only economic or material welfare. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. When we say practical we want to mean only the material or economic aspects of man such food, clothing and shelter thereby leading a moderate or luxurious life. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Hegel is known for popularizing three important concepts - thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. For Hegel, there is a dialectical relationship between thesis and anti-thesis. The dialectic between the two results in synthesis. The synthesis is created by borrowing some aspects of the thesis and anti-thesis but not the whole of either. The upshot of this article is that instead of applying an either/or approach – preferring instrumentalist epistemology (anti-thesis) and rejecting the disinterested pursuit of knowledge (thesis) or vice versa – it is imperative to adopt some aspects of both ideals and create a synthesis. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In this paper, extrinsically motivating factors refers mainly realizing economic or material desires of a person while the intrinsic factors is/are valuing knowledge in and of itself even when knowledge is not used to solve immediate practical problems because of, though in the long run, the belief that it would have an impact on the moral, critical and spiritual aspects of the learner. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)