THEORY VERSUS PRACTICE:
CONCEPTIONS OF THE UNIVERSITY AND CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

by

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Abstract

The tension between thought and practice is an ancient one in Western societies. Universities, as institutions of learning, have been at the centre of this tension since their inception. In the first chapter I trace the history of the university, noting shifts in their tendency to dedicate their activities to thought or to practice, describing the present situation as another shift toward practice. In the second chapter, I examine three conceptions of a university—liberal, scientific, and economic—which are current in the present debate over the university’s purpose. In the third chapter, I describe the philosophical division of theory and practice, and how a tendency to divorce the two relates to the three conceptions of a university. Using the philosophy of John Dewey, I argue that a divorce of the two is unsupportable, and propose a Deweyan idea of the university that addresses the contemporary problems described earlier.
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A History of the University in Europe

These abbreviations refer to the four-volume series published by Cambridge University Press, general editor Walter Rüegg.


The Collected Works of John Dewey

These abbreviations refer to the *Collected Works of John Dewey* published by Southern Illinois University Press, the standard reference collection for Dewey scholarship, general editor Jo Ann Boydston.


1. Introductory: Historical Precedents, Contemporary Challenges

The tension between thought and practice is an ancient one in Western societies. Universities, as institutions of learning, have been at the centre of this tension for nearly a millennium. In Section 1.1, I sketch this history, showing that the pendulum has swung several times an emphasis on thought and an emphasis on practice in the social role and value of the universities. In Section 1.2, I trace some important developments since the Second World War, which define the present situation of the university and its challenges, and represent another swing towards an emphasis on practice. This contemporary problematic situation sets the stage for my investigation of three ideal conceptions of the university in Chapter 2, which are the typical positions of interlocutors in the debate over what universities should be in the twenty-first century; Section 1.3 outlines the analytic framework that I deploy to this end. In Chapter 3, I reflect on the thought/practice dichotomy and, using the philosophy of John Dewey, I argue that the divide is detrimental to our conceptions of the university institution.

This chapter’s historical and sociological sections will doubtless have inadequacies from the perspective of historical or sociological research—events and phenomena skipped over, schools of thought unmentioned, dissenting authors ignored, and so forth. In part this is due to space and time constraints on this thesis, but it is partially due to my own lack of familiarity with these fields. Since my primary aim is philosophical, I can only sketch the historical and sociological context in enough detail to define the problem inspiring and motivating the present investigation into the ways we conceive of the university.

I feel one final prefatory caveat is in order, given the institutional context in which I am writing—namely, a department that actively critiques ways of thinking about education that work exclusively from Western thought. The great majority of my remarks in this chapter (and throughout this thesis), in fact, draw on Western European (especially British) and North
American perspectives. This bias is partly because universities have a longer history and greater presence in those regions, partly because they form the traditions of thought that I am most familiar with, partly because of bias in existing scholarship, and partly to keep the discussion focused. Because universities now have global presence and influence, and certainly experience different social pressures in other regions of the world, there will be limitations on the applicability of my remarks. The reader should bear in mind that while I often use phrases such as “the university” without qualification, I am primarily referring to a particular set of contexts obtaining mainly, but not exclusively or even uniformly, in Western Europe and North America. I am not dismissing the importance or relevance of other perspectives, but I do not have the ability to address them here. A complete study of the philosophy of universities and similar institutions in a wider variety of socio-geographical contexts would require volumes.

1.1. A Brief History

In this section, I trace a history of the university in order to lay out the background of the contemporary challenges discussed in Section 1.2. Citing historical literature, I sketch an outline of how the university evolved from its medieval inception to the mid-twentieth century, emphasizing periods of rapid or fundamental change and contemporary debates about the social value of the university and its relation to the divide between theory and practice. The next section argues that a similar period of rapid change and revaluation has been underway in universities since the mid-twentieth century.

Universities, like the societies they are a part of, have always been undergoing changes brought on by various internal and external social processes. Even the relatively stable medieval universities experienced considerable change as new faculties and disciplines were created, the social and political functions of university education shifted, and various institutions opened, foundered, reopened, and moved. As Abraham Flexner writes,
a university, like all other human institutions…is not outside, but inside the general social fabric of a given era. It is not something apart, something historic, something that yields as little as possible to forces and influences that are more or less new. It is, on the contrary…an expression of the age, as well as an influence operating on both present and future.\(^1\)

That is to say, while the university has never been an institution totally isolated from society—both unperturbed by social forces and not exerting any influence outside itself—neither has it ever been indistinguishable from the society around it—simply at the whims of external forces—nor has it ever been in a place of uncontested authority over wide swaths of society. Like any social institution, the university is subject to pushes and pulls from the society of which it is a part, on which it also pushes and pulls. The university and its wider society co-determine each other’s evolution.

At times, changes in the university have been relatively slow, reflecting institutional inertia and relatively stable social conditions. At other times, the university has changed rapidly, brought on by an interaction of major social changes and paradigm shifts within the institution. This institutional evolution, in interaction with the evolution of other institutions and changing social and material conditions, can be thought of as analogous to the evolution of an organism in interaction with other evolving organisms and changing environmental conditions.\(^2\) During long periods of stability, the organism changes relatively slowly because its biology is well-adapted to the (biotic and abiotic) environment that it interacts with and modifies. Sometimes, however, rapid change may be precipitated by a change in the environment (e.g. an invasive organism, climate change) that forces the organism to adapt or die out, or a random mutation that proves


unusually successful or significantly alters the environment through the organism’s new
behaviour or biology. Likewise, when an institution is well-adapted to a relatively stable social
environment, change in the institution is relatively slow; it fulfils its social functions in
interaction with individuals and other institutions. When some external change in society
requires the institution to adapt, relatively rapid change will occur or else the institution will
vanish; its characteristic roles, if they are still relevant, will be picked up by others. Internal
change may also set about rapid institutional change, if it unexpectedly improves the institution’s
ability to function, or even makes other aspects of the social environment change in a significant
way. At all stages, it must be borne in mind that the social environment is a system of human
agents, whose individual actions are the substance of social pressures or forces or patterns.

1.1.1. The Middle Ages (ca. 1100–1500)

Universities initially appeared in medieval Europe around the turn of the twelfth to the thirteenth
century, though the practice of such institutions was to invent more ancient founders.3 Walter
Rüegg suggests that the university structure emerged as a way to formally organize the
relationships between students and teachers with a greater degree of independence from secular
and ecclesiastical authorities than existed in other schools.4 In the twelfth century, Bologna,
Paris, and Oxford exemplified the social and educational environments that enabled the
development of the university institution. These cities’ political and economic power, their
foreign students’ high social status, and their teachers’ excellent reputations allowed their local


intellectual communities to pressure their governments and the Church for special freedoms and privileges in their scholarly and educational activities.\(^5\)

The social roles of the university were largely the same as those fulfilled by various schools and independent scholars before the advent of universities, only with slightly less supervision by central Church authorities. The subjects of study generally organized around four faculties: the lower arts faculty, which taught the trivium, quadrivium, and philosophy, and the higher faculties of theology, law (civil and canon), and medicine, though not all universities had all of the higher faculties and a few had additional faculties.\(^6\) The kings and popes, in granting legal recognition and privilege to medieval universities, hoped university graduates would help resolve tensions and contradictions in legal and theological doctrine, support their central authority, and fill secular and ecclesiastical offices.\(^7\) Graduates of law and theology quickly dominated legal and administrative professions in the Church; the secular legal profession and national and local governments also employed many graduates of law and the arts.\(^8\) The profession of medicine was slower to embrace university education: “physicians with medical training were a minority in the Middle Ages, but one which regarded itself as an élite; in the physicians’ guild, however, they did not receive precedence over those without academic degrees.”\(^9\)


\(^7\) Rüegg, “Themes,” *HUE I*, 16, 18.


\(^9\) Rüegg, “Themes,” *HUE I*, 21–22;
Despite the rapid success of the university in medieval European society, “the courses of study, the examinations, and the degrees were not oriented to the provision of any training for occupations other than those of university teachers.”\textsuperscript{10} Rüegg claims that the success of this principally scholastic approach in various practical professions confirms “the social value of the pure striving for knowledge,”\textsuperscript{11} that the essence of the university is its theoretical pursuits, whatever accidental practical benefits there may be:

it was not the demand for socially applicable knowledge which led to the foundation of the universities so much as the existence of certain disciplines [worth pursuing for their own sake] which had shown themselves to be of value for dealing with certain social tasks.\textsuperscript{12}

Many living in the Late Middle Ages, however, did not agree: “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.”\textsuperscript{13} At the same time, European society was shaken by a series of turbulent events: famine, plague, war, the decline of the central authority of the Holy Roman Empire, and the breakdown of the universal authority of the Catholic Church. The universities, because of their strong connections to ecclesiastical and secular hierarchies, were perhaps most profoundly affected by the Western Schism of 1378–1418, when the cardinals elected two rival popes, one in Rome, the other in Avignon—later, as part of resolving the schism, a third pope was elected in Pisa. Religious and secular authorities were embroiled in bitter debate over how to resolve the crisis without destroying the Catholic Church. The theological faculties participated by offering their counsel

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 21.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 23.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 26.

and debating the Schism themselves, though they were not allowed to participate directly in decision-making. The arguments of academic theologians carried enough influence in conciliar discussions, however, that the rival (anti-)popes “were prodigal in granting privileges to religious and secular authorities wishing to set up [universities] in the territories under their jurisdiction.”

The Schism was eventually resolved, but not without irreparably damaging the reputation and authority of the papacy. According to Jacques Verger,

> the [Western] Schism…represents a genuine rupture in the history of the universities, which was all the more dramatic for unfolding against a background of crisis (plagues, wars, and economic depression). The unit[y] of medieval Christendom was irremediably shattered, and universalist pretensions, such as were cultivated at the University of Paris, were no longer in fashion. Here one is witness to the birth of the modern state and to the awakening of national sentiments.\(^{15}\)

In response to the growing autonomy of European states, universities in the fifteenth century “were more closely associated with sovereigns and secular authorities, and became, in effect, schools for the intellectual élite and ruling classes of the states in which they were situated.”\(^{16}\) In other words, the institution adapted to the rapidly changing social conditions that were emerging towards the end of the Middle Ages, in part by influencing the development of those conditions because of the already established importance of their education to secular and religious hierarchies.

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\(^{14}\) Paolo Nardi, “Relations with Authority,” *HUE I*, 101.

\(^{15}\) Jacques Verger, “Patterns,” *HUE I*, 57. I have opted for the phrase “Western Schism” to avoid confusion with the earlier East–West Schism that divided Chaceldonian Christianity into the Catholic and Orthodox churches, and the later Protestant Reformation (which, in this thesis, I never refer to as a “schism”).

\(^{16}\) Nardi, “Relations with Authority,” 102.
1.1.2. Early Modern Europe and the Americas (1500–1800)

Rüegg argues that the patterns exhibited by Early Modern universities have a common source:
“the changed conception of time and the world and the parallel change in the image which
humanistically educated intellectuals had of their own professional role and of their powers and
obligations in society.”  

Academics were conscious that an epochal shift was in progress,
defined by events such as the Renaissance movement, the fall of Constantinople, the invention of
printing, the discovery of the Americas, the Protestant Reformation, and the emergence of
modern science. This new attitude initially appeared with the emergence of the Renaissance
movement in fifteenth-century Italy, but spread to the rest of Europe in the sixteenth century.
While the institutional structure of the universities changed little in the sixteenth and seventeenth
centuries, the academics within them became interested in a wider range of ancient authors,
with whom they engaged not as “eternally valid authorities” but as “interlocutors from another
time” who provided different perspectives on philosophical questions that enriched the scholar’s
own views.  

Arts curricula expanded to include history and Greek, and persuasiveness of
argument and evidence became more important to scholarship than rules and doctrine.
Universities shed general education, which became the purview of their residential colleges or
schools of various types “which prepared students not only for university study, but also for
direct assumption of social roles.”  

17 Walter Rüegg, “Themes,” HUE 2, 5.
18 Ibid., 13.
19 Ibid., 24.
21 Ibid.
At the same time, new scientific advances and overseas exploration produced an attitude of interest in new discoveries and ideas unknown to the ancients.\textsuperscript{22} Academics began to shift their closest loyalty from their ecclesiastical and national overseers to their colleagues in the pursuit of learning. Transnational networks of communication became increasingly important, as scholars shared their findings and discussed the direction of their research.\textsuperscript{23} Entering into dialogue with the views of various authors, so that the student might reason his way to his own conclusions, became the method of instruction.\textsuperscript{24} Transnational networks of communication became increasingly important to the intellectual community. Letter-writing was common, learned societies and academies began to form in the sixteenth century, and academic journals appeared in the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{25}

The social role of university scholars also changed: “much more so than during the Middle Ages, the universities of early modern times attended to the demands of their respective societies,” at least so far as the ruling élites were concerned.\textsuperscript{26} This new concern for practical use came hand-in-hand with a new conception of knowledge as a means to controlling nature, as emphasized by Francis Bacon.\textsuperscript{27} Over the sixteenth century, new scientific methods were developed for disciplines such as geography, botany, and zoology, which were important to the

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{22} Rüegg, “Themes,” \textit{HUE} 2, 14–16.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 7.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 24.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 16–17, 26.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 7–8.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 17.
\end{flushright}
exploration of regions previously unknown to Europeans.\textsuperscript{28} Theology, philosophy, and jurisprudence were also preoccupied with questions that had arisen because of new discoveries, such as international law, the rights of indigenous non-European peoples and human beings more generally, and the nature of humanity, reason, and education.\textsuperscript{29} In the seventeenth century, the new mechanistic physics developed by scientists such as Galileo and Newton fundamentally changed the European outlook regarding the natural world.

During the Enlightenment, the universities became less important to the advancement of the burgeoning sciences: “The most innovative scholars and scientists left the universities to enter the service of princely states, to join academies, or to seek the leisure and freedom needed for their research as private persons.”\textsuperscript{30} According to Rüegg, this drop in the university’s importance to scientific innovation is partly due to the dogmatism and censorship that religious communities continued to impose at universities throughout the Early Modern period. Another important factor was the changing significance of Renaissance humanism. Gradually, the ancient sources that served as equals in intellectual dialogue became increasingly authoritative, as they were in the medieval universities, and the concern for practical usefulness waned. By the late seventeenth century, intellectuals felt pulled in two directions—on one side, the ancient worldview that served as the model for instruction, on the other, the modern worldview informed by scientific progress.\textsuperscript{31} Contemporary literature often criticized or lampooned the “sterile

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 20–22.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 22–23.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 38.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 39–40.
pedantry and pretence of learning” that had taken over university education.\textsuperscript{32} Over the eighteenth century, popular and political resentment mounted against the universities. In France, the Revolution closed all of the universities along with other medieval institutions. Elsewhere in Europe many other universities were closed at the turn of the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. National rulers across Europe replaced universities with professional schools, hoping to take advantage of the practical value of higher education.\textsuperscript{33}

In the Americas, the first universities appeared in Spanish colonies in the sixteenth century. These Central and South American universities modelled themselves after the University of Salamanca, a prestigious medieval university. They were typically quite small—many had only the faculties of arts, theology, and canon law represented—and heavily influenced by colonial governments and local religious orders. In French North America, higher education was modelled after theological seminaries and Jesuit colleges. British colonial universities, which began to appear in the seventeenth century, borrowed the collegial structure of Oxbridge and the more diverse curricula and independence of thought of Scottish universities.\textsuperscript{34} North American colonial higher education was, in general, more influenced by local needs than by state authority. Initially, their main function was the training of clergy, and to a lesser extent secular colonial officials.\textsuperscript{35} As the ethnic and religious diversity of the English colonies increased over the eighteenth century, religious influence over their universities began


\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{34} John Roberts, Águeda M. Rodríguez Cruz, and Jurgen Herbst, “Exporting Models,” \textit{HUE 2}, 259–62.

\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Ibid.}, 268–69.
to wane.\textsuperscript{36} In the second half of the eighteenth century, especially after the American Revolution, universities in New England secularized further, and became open to a wider range of social classes.\textsuperscript{37}

\textbf{1.1.3. Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Europe and North America (1800–1945)}

In the early nineteenth century, two new models of the university appeared in Europe, which explicitly bring the division between thought and practice to light. Napoleonic reforms introduced a model of university tightly regulated by state authorities with a curriculum tailored to meet the professional and administrative needs of the nation.\textsuperscript{38} Students and teachers were subjected to strict, military-like discipline, divisions between faculties were rigid, and career paths were highly specialized.\textsuperscript{39} Research was restricted to a small number of universities in Paris and the learned societies: “Until 1860 outside Paris the French university landscape comprised [a] scholarly desert…it proved impossible to develop any real scholarly activity.”\textsuperscript{40} Because of high examination fees associated with law and medicine, these professions remained inaccessible to the general public, and their teachers better paid.\textsuperscript{41} The French model persisted in France, Spain, Italy, and Romania for much of the nineteenth century,\textsuperscript{42} but was much less successful elsewhere, though it did influence higher education where French political influence

\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Ibid.}, 273.

\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Ibid.}, 274–75.

\textsuperscript{38} Rüegg, “Themes,” \textit{HUE} 3, 10.

\textsuperscript{39} \textit{Ibid.}, 4–5; Christophe Charle, “Patterns,” \textit{HUE} 3, 45.

\textsuperscript{40} Charle, “Patterns,” 45.

\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Ibid.}, 46.

\textsuperscript{42} Rüegg, “Themes,” \textit{HUE} 3, 11; Charle, “Patterns,” 44–47.
was strong: North Africa, French West Africa, Syria, and Indo-China. In response to criticism from politicians and professors, towards the end of the nineteenth century the French government eventually allowed a diversification of subjects to be taught and permitted more research activities, but the universities were still subject to very close state supervision.

In Prussia, the education minister Wilhelm von Humboldt set in motion a set of reforms “expressly directed against the Napoleonic system.” In contrast to the French model, Humboldt’s model was characterized by academic freedom and a concern for research. The university teacher became essentially a researcher—his teaching dependent on his research activities—the students apprentice researchers, for whom freedom to study was paramount. Over the nineteenth century, the faculties of law and theology declined, while medicine and philosophy (which comprised the sciences and liberal arts) expanded. The German model spread globally, having the strongest influence outside Europe in the United States and Japan. Because of the German universities’ preoccupation with the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, degree programmes were not designed to be useful to specific professions outside the university, and the doctoral degree, previously a mostly honourific title, took on an important role in the training of professional researchers. However, non-academic professions increasingly saw university credentials as a symbol of competence, which in turn made those professions


44 Charle, “Patterns,” 56–57.

45 Ibid., 47.

46 Ibid., 48.

47 Ibid., 50.

more reliant on university expertise.\textsuperscript{49} According to Konrad Jarausch, the rise of the educated professional middle class is, in this way, linked to the development of the research university.\textsuperscript{50} By the late nineteenth century, however, as more and more people sought higher education to improve their socio-economic prospects, the Humboldt-style universities found themselves in competition with new technical and professional schools, which by 1899 had the same legal status as the research universities. The rapidly changing character of the student body came as a shock:

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…The Humboldtian university was set up to educate elites in scholarly methods, particularly those from the educated middle class and the aristocracy. This changed when the universities started to attract a majority of students…who wanted to capitalize on their education.\textsuperscript{51}

Larger numbers of students required a larger staff of teachers, who often were non-professorial, of low status within the institutional hierarchy, paid less (if at all), and deprived of chances for professional advancement.\textsuperscript{52} While teaching and research remained fundamentally linked in early–twentieth-century German universities, curricula were beginning to shift toward the practical, especially with the ascendance of German nationalism: “the German university system


\textsuperscript{50} \textit{Ibid.}, 386.

\textsuperscript{51} Charle, “Patterns,” 58–59.

\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Ibid.}, 59.
as a whole…was getting perilously close to the Napoleonic model which in its origins it had rejected totally."\(^{53}\)

On the British Isles, universities largely developed according to local needs for specialized higher education, especially in the Scottish universities and the new (so-called “redbrick” or “civic”) universities that were founded in the early twentieth century. Like their continental counterparts, British universities (outside Oxbridge) began to take in more students from a wider range of social backgrounds.\(^{54}\) Oxford, Cambridge, and Trinity College, Dublin, however, remained true to their medieval origins in their devotion to the Anglican faith, institutional structure, curriculum, and social class for the first half of the nineteenth century.\(^{55}\) In the 1860s and 1870s, acts of parliament forced Oxford and Cambridge to modernize—like many other European universities, they became secular, open (in principle) to women and members of lower classes, and adopted the German research model.\(^{56}\)

In Canada, universities were more diverse and of mixed character. Many grew out of older grammar schools or seminaries. Some, such as the University of King’s College (which, in 1809, was the first institution to be incorporated as a university in Canada) were modelled after the Oxbridge liberal arts university. Others, such as McGill and Toronto, grew by federating with arts colleges, seminaries, and professional schools, while also developing research.\(^{57}\) U.S. American universities in the early nineteenth century were largely modelled on the liberal arts

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 61.

\(^{54}\) Ibid., 62.


\(^{56}\) Charle, “Patterns,” 61–62.

\(^{57}\) Shils and Roberts, “The Diffusion of European Models,” 175–76.
tradition of Oxbridge, on a smaller institutional scale. Research was not a major concern of many teachers, and students were not usually taught research methods. The aim, rather, was “to provide a fundamental education…this, it was believed, would discipline the mind, form and strengthen character, and provide the cultural requisites for a life of responsible leadership in society.” In the mid-nineteenth century, young intellectuals who had studied in Germany and a handful of university presidents introduced the German research model, to some resistance by the older liberal universities. As a compromise between the British and German models, U.S. American schools kept elements of the former in their undergraduate programmes, and introduced the elements of the latter in their graduate schools, an institutional structure unique to North America at the time. With the scientific research paradigm came the introduction of academic freedom. The newer German technical and professional schools also partly inspired U.S. American reforms, culminating in the Morrill Act of 1862 and the creation of the land-grant universities and colleges, which offered education in specialized technical fields. In short, higher education in North America was a patchwork of thought-oriented research universities and practice-oriented technical and professional colleges.

Worldwide, the importance of scientific innovation to the World Wars, especially the Second, demonstrated the practical value—and potential terror—of modern science:

The extraordinary success of the applied sciences gradually overcame the old prejudice of the supposed superiority of theoretical science over applied research…The crucial new inventions and many alternative materials, improved transportation, and the mighty potential for destruction that culminated in the atom bomb and even space travel, taught

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58 Ibid., 166–67.
59 Ibid., 167.
60 Ibid., 168.
61 Ibid.
people during and after the Second World War just what far-reaching and lasting effects scientific research could have on modern life.\textsuperscript{62}

After the wars, North American egalitarian ideals were imported by Western European universities, changing the nature of the teacher–student relationship: “The distinguished, bourgeois professor gradually gave way to an older and more experienced partner, who was confident in both laboratory and seminar.”\textsuperscript{63} Universities admitted students from an even wider range of social backgrounds, welcoming women, members of the working classes, and foreign students in much greater numbers than in the previous century.

1.1.4. Summary

In this section, I have traced the history of the university from the Middle Ages to the Second World War. As universities evolved along with their social environments, conceptions of their value have shifted back and forth between intrinsically valuable theoretical knowledge, and instrumentally valuable practical knowledge. Medieval universities were interested in knowledge for its own sake as they tried to reconcile inconsistent doctrines. Early Modern universities turned their attention to the practical usefulness of scientific knowledge before retreating back into socially disinterested bastions of theory. Eighteenth century reforms sought a system of university education aligned with practical social needs, culminating in the French model of a university. The German model, with its focus on theoretical research rather than practical usefulness, arose to prominence over the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in response to French-style reforms. As I discuss in the next section, growth in enrolment and in the importance of applications of scientific knowledge defines the situation of contemporary universities: another shift toward practical usefulness over theory.


\textsuperscript{63} \textit{Ibid.}, 670.
1.2. Contemporary Challenges

Extending his remarks about Early Modern universities, Willem Frijhoff claims 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.”\textsuperscript{64} Since the Second World War, several factors have brought about a new period of profound and rapid change in the universities, which some describe as a crisis—or rather, a series of crises: in funding, in research, in education, in institutional identity—putting this unbroken feeling of identity in question. In this section, I examine some of the changes underway in the universities, and argue that they have produced a genuine problem of continuity of identity that brings out, once again, the tension between thought and practice. Rapid social and correlative institutional changes in the latter half of the twentieth century have changed the social roles of universities and public conceptions of their characteristic goods. Consequently, there is uncertainty regarding the viability of the traditional forms and values of the university; equally, however, there is uncertainty regarding the appropriateness of proposed new forms and values.

1.2.1. Growth in University Education

Stefan Collini identifies three major changes underway in the universities, which have each been the subject of much discussion, lamentation, and prognostication in recent years.\textsuperscript{65} The first change is the rapid increase in the proportion of the young adult population enrolling in university education. This growth in enrolment was already underway in the nineteenth century, as discussed above, but accelerated in the latter half of the twentieth century, receiving a boost from the post–World War II baby boom. For a picture of this growth in student numbers,

\textsuperscript{64} Willem Frijhoff, “Patterns,” \textit{HUE} 2, 47.

\textsuperscript{65} Stefan Collini, \textit{What Are Universities For?} (London, UK: Penguin Books, 2012). Collini concentrates on his national context, the United Kingdom, but, as I show in this section, these trends are occurring much more widely.
consider Canada as a representative example. Growth in the number of full-time undergraduates aged 18 to 21 outpaced the growth of the population of the same age grade in the 1960s. In the 1970s, the growth in undergraduate enrolment among 18-to-21 year-olds kept pace with rapid growth in the age grade’s population. After the baby boom generation had passed through the university system, enrolment was expected to decline along with the declining population of young adults. However, after a slight slump at the end of the 1970s, enrolment among 18-to-21 year-olds has continued to grow strongly since the mid-1980s, accelerating in the 2000s as the millennial generation (the so-called “baby boom echo”) reached university age.66 The same pattern has occurred in the United Kingdom67 and United States.68

Martin Trow hypothesizes that three ideal systems of higher education obtain depending on the proportion of a nation’s university-attending age grade that enrols. When the proportion is less than 15 per cent, the older élite system of higher education prevails, which he describes as “prepar[ing] students for broad elite roles in government and the learned professions.”69 From their emergence to the early twentieth century, universities enrolled this proportion of the young


adult population and served these social functions. Between proportions of 15 and 50 per cent, the older model gives way to a system of mass higher education, in which “the institutions are still preparing elites, but a much broader range of elites that includes the leading strata of all the technical and economic organizations of the society. And the emphasis shifts from the shaping of character to the transmission of skills for more specific technical elite roles.” Many developed countries have reached this level of university participation among 18-to-21 year-olds. When the proportion is above 50 per cent, the system transitions to one of universal higher education, at which point

there is concern for the first time with the preparation of large numbers for life in an advanced industrial society; they are training not primarily elites, either broad or narrow, but the whole population, and their chief concern is to maximize the adaptability of that population to a society whose chief characteristic is rapid social and technological change.

Each of the three types has a notably different character, reflecting the changing social role of the university as the society itself changes, in part because of the higher proportion of the population with university education.

While growth in enrolment initially exploded in large part because of the post–World War II baby boom, other factors have contributed to the growth of the universities. Rüegg points to Cold War competition between the Eastern and Western Blocs, followed by student movements demanding increased access to higher education as further causes of growth.

According to Trow, “higher education during the 1950s and 1960s was increasingly justified by

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70 Ibid.

71 Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, Trends in Higher Education, 64.

72 Trow, Problems, 7.

reference to its presumed contribution to economic growth, and there was a strong emphasis on the links between university training and industrial development.”

Trow also describes another social pressure in favour of expansion: changing attitudes towards university attendance. As higher education becomes open to a larger segment of the population, “people increasingly begin to see entry to higher education as a right for those who have certain formal qualifications.” As a result, “sending one’s sons and daughters to college or university increasingly becomes one of the decencies of life rather than an extraordinary privilege reserved for people of high status or extraordinary ability.” However, this attitude of entitlement soon changes into a sense of obligation as the proportion of the population attending higher education approaches universal access. At this point, because so many young people attend university, “failure to go on to higher education from secondary school is increasingly a mark of some defect of mind or character.”

Moreover, the importance of a university degree for achieving gainful employment and a comfortable standard of living increases: “as more people go on to higher education, the best jobs and opportunities and the economic rewards in life come to be reserved for people who have completed a university degree.” Because a greater proportion of the population has university degrees, careers that did not previously require higher education begin to demand it of their prospective workers, whether because the character of those vocations changes to become dependent on highly educated workers, because there are simply more applicants with higher

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74 Trow, Problems, 32.

75 Ibid., 7.

76 Ibid., 41.

77 Ibid., 7.

78 Ibid.
education credentials in the pool, or both. Jennifer Silva reports on this evolving attitude toward university education among working-class youth in the United States, showing that the sense of higher education as a right, and even an obligation, is becoming universal among young adults. According to Silva, if they do not find gainful employment after completing a programme of higher education—or if they fail to complete or even enter such a programme of study—they become bitter about a system of education that, from their perspective, sold them on false hope. What is perhaps worse, they may also blame themselves for their failure, internalizing the defects of mind and character that Trow expects to be imputed to those who do not complete higher education when access is so widespread.

The growth of university systems creates a series of challenges. One challenge is educational. Collini wonders whether it is reasonable to expect all British universities to provide the same range and level of activities for an increasingly large, increasingly diverse student body. Citing Clark Kerr’s three-tiered California university system (community colleges, state universities, and research universities), he suggests that a similar structure may be able to accommodate an increasing range of student capabilities and interests. According to James Côté and Anton Allahar, the growth of university education in North America has brought about a decline in that quality of university education. For them, the root of the problem is pressure on secondary schools from governments, parents, and students to ensure that as many students as possible

79 Ibid., 42.


possible complete high school (or its equivalent) and go on to university, so that young adults will not be disadvantaged by a lack of education. While a laudable goal in principle, Côté and Allahar argue that, in practice, high schools have tended to inflate their grades, meaning that students can achieve a higher results with less effort or ability, in order to pass students along.\(^8^2\)

As a result, students leave high school with worse abilities, grades that misrepresent those abilities, and a set of study habits that are not adequate to the rigours of university education. When these students enter university, a large number of them are disengaged from their studies. “A generation ago, these disengaged students would simply have quit, been failed, or been expelled” before graduating high school; now, with the growth of higher education, they are the responsibility of the universities.\(^8^3\) Not only are such students not in a position to benefit from university education, they negatively affect the education of their peers. Professors reduce their standards in order to lower (potentially career-jeopardizing) failure and drop-out rates, and to lessen student demands on their time (or even harassment).\(^8^4\) More class time is spent on remedial exercises that waste the time of adequately prepared students.\(^8^5\) Moreover, more university resources have to be directed at assisting struggling students to get up to speed or transition out of the university system.\(^8^6\) The extent to which the educational situation is as Côté and Allahar describe is debateable. It may be, for instance, that student disengagement has less to do with declining student ability and more to do with university education being out of step with

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\(^8^3\) *Ibid.*, 37.


\(^8^5\) *Ibid.*, 47.

\(^8^6\) *Ibid.*, 41–44.
social expectations that university education should be practically rather than theoretically minded. In either case, Côté and Allahar’s concerns highlight the educational difficulties universities are now facing.

The cost of higher education is a continuous problem. University education is expensive to provide, and as more and more young people from ever-more diverse backgrounds hope to reap the social and economic benefits of a university degree, one of the most important questions is how to pay for it. Given an uncertain economy and the mounting cost of health care and social security for the aging baby boomers, public funds are stretched thin. Governments are thus more reluctant to make significant contributions, as evidenced by perennial stories of universities struggling to provide the same quality of education with less money from public sources.  

Furthermore, governments are interested in seeing that their money is well spent, so universities accepting their support “have to accept becoming answerable to that government and its conception of what the electorate will bear.” According to Collini, the two biggest public demands are that universities be useful and responsive to the needs of the economy, and that they continue to expand enrolment to a larger and more diverse segment of the population.

1.2.2. Changing Political Values

This political pressure to be economically useful is also felt in the research agenda of universities; Collini claims that the shift from pure to applied research is the second major


88 Collini, *What are Universities For?*, 35.

89 Ibid.
institutional change affecting universities over the last half century. In the United States, government interest in scientific innovations following the Second World War led to the establishment of the National Science Foundation and other arrangements for the funding of basic scientific research over the 1950s. Over the rest of the century, successive governments gradually shifted their interests towards applied research to support the economy and the military. By the late 1970s, support for basic research was a politicized issue, and depended on the state of the economy. Government support for applied science and engineering, especially translational research, continued to grow over the 1980s–1990s, and while basic research has remained an important government expenditure, funding levels are declining, and basic research is increasingly justified by pointing to its (potential) practical value. U.S. federal support for scientific research as a percentage of GDP has gradually declined since the 1990s, while private industry has filled the gap. In Canada, funding for research as a percentage of GDP rose very gradually over the 1990s, but has steadily fallen in the twenty-first century. Over the same period, funding for research from private sources has risen rapidly. Collini points to


similar trends in Britain. In each case, governments and private sources have made it clear that their funding is contingent on a return on their investment; governments are interested in economic returns that justify their re-election, private sources in generating profit. Some have suggested that these trends are part of a global shift, in developed nations, toward an economy less dependent on extracting natural resources and making consumer products, and more dependent on scientific and technological innovations—a “knowledge economy.”\footnote{94} According to Collini, the increasing role of private sources of funding has encouraged the development of a more entrepreneurial attitude at universities—administrators are more likely to emphasize connections with industry instead of pursuing knowledge for its own sake.\footnote{95} Since the 2008 recession, calls for practical directions in research and education, responsive to economic demands, have only intensified.\footnote{96}

For Collini, in addition to the immense problems of simply finding ways to afford quality higher education for ever-larger cohorts and safeguarding theoretical research, there is a danger that “if politicians and administrators do not in the first place have an adequate conception of the activities that they are trying to fund and regulate, then their measures will be bound to do damage to the very things they claim to be supporting.”\footnote{97} For Collini, this worry is particularly concerning given a change in recent decades in the public conception of the value of universities,


\footnote{95} Collini, \textit{What Are Universities For?}, 34.

\footnote{96} Goldie Blumenstyk, “In a Time of Crisis, Colleges Ought to be Making History,” \textit{Chronicle of Higher Education} (Washington, DC), May 1, 2009.

\footnote{97} \textit{Ibid.}, 38.
the third change he describes. This change in the value associated with university activities has accompanied the growth of university education and changes in the universities’ research agendas. In the 1960s–70s universities (and the arts) were expected to provide British society with some form of cultural good, and as such received substantial public funding. From the 1980s onward, a change of attitude in Britain is evidenced by a series of calculated social reforms enacted by conservative governments. Public funds for universities were slashed, the process of obtaining funds became more competitive, educational and research activities at universities were subjected to increased governmental oversight, and the polytechnic schools were reclassified as universities. These reforms were intended to align university education and research with the demands of business and industry, and to make higher education, and the social mobility afforded by university degrees, more accessible to a wider range of social classes. A contemporaneous shift in North American public attitudes toward higher education is noted by Steven Rosenstone:

It used to be more or less taken for granted that higher education was a public good. That consensus has vanished. A well-educated citizenry is no longer regarded universally as offering collective benefits to our community, our state, or our nation. Instead, higher education is increasingly considered a private good that benefits primarily the individual who receives the degree.

According to David Labaree, this public–private tension in educational thinking and policy is endemic to liberal democracies (particularly the United States), reflecting a deeper tension between economic and political values, or between the inevitable rise of socio-economic élites in

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98 Ibid., 33.

capitalist society and the egalitarian principles of a democratic society. Rosenstone claims this ideological shift is partly responsible for the reduction of public relative to private funding for universities in the United States since the 1980s. The trend toward private sources (especially households) taking on an increasing share of the costs of higher education has been observed in most of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) member countries since 2000, even though every OECD country increased the absolute amount of public spending allocated to higher education over the same period.

Collini and Rosenstone are describing two different ideological shifts. Rosenstone focuses on the change in public conceptions of who benefits the most from university education: the student or the society in which the student lives. Collini also describes this ideological shift, but adds another dimension: cultural or economic value which can be either public or private. So the question is not just one of public goods and private goods, but also what kind of good universities are expected to produce. The fundamental shift, I think, is again one of intrinsically valued theoretical education and research, which was expected to benefit the public at large through the diffusion of cultured university graduates, to instrumentally valued practical education, which is expected to primarily benefit the university graduates themselves and secondarily to benefit society through their economic productivity.

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102 OECD, *Education at a Glance 2013: OECD Indicators* (OECD Publishing, 2013), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eag-2013-en/>, 207, Table B3.2b. Because the OECD countries are a very diverse group, each country is experiencing these trends differently. There are also exceptions: in Spain and Poland, for instance, public sources are taking on an increasing share of the costs of higher education.
1.2.3. Summary

The problem of the social roles and purpose of the university is not just one of public and political perceptions external to the university. As Trow writes,

the old consensus about the nature and proper functions of the university has broken down; in every country academic [women and] men differ among themselves in their attitudes toward changes in the university that are already under way or are likely to accompany further growth.\(^{103}\)

In the wake of the developments discussed in this section, what universities are and what they are for are in question. These challenges have brought to light the age-old debate regarding what makes universities valuable—something intrinsic to their activities of thought, or the instrumental practical value those activities have to society. As I showed in Section 1.1, this dichotomy between theory and practice has surfaced multiple times in the history of the university. Because of the growth of higher education and changing public perceptions of university activities, the pressure to be useful has mounted. Universities have been knocked off of their pedestal, where they enjoyed a comfortable existence sustained by the social élite, whether or not the élites shared the academics’ belief that their work was intrinsically valuable. Now, universities have been made to find their way like many other social institutions: by proving their worth through their usefulness to the masses—many of whom do not share the academic conception of research and teaching as intrinsically valuable activities. In response, there has sometimes been invocation of ideals, which attempt to justify the existence of the university while maintaining its unbroken feeling of identity. In Chapter 2, I turn to an analysis

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\(^{103}\) Trow, *Problems*, 27. One editorial remark on my way of handling sexist terminology, since this is the first instance: in quotations where masculine noun phrases are used in the original to refer to an individual or group that is of mixed gender or without a specified gender, I have inserted a feminine equivalent in brackets alongside it, or a neuter equivalent in its place. I have also made such changes when applying to a mixed-gender or gender-unspecified group writings that (for historical reasons) assume all members of the group will be male. I find this solution more appropriate than leaving the text as-is and less irritating than inserting the word “*sic*” after the offending phrase.
of three of these ideal conceptions of the university that appear in the debate Trow refers to. In Chapter 3, using the philosophy of John Dewey, I will argue that the theory/practice dichotomy itself, which has defined so much of the development of universities throughout their history but especially in the last two centuries, is part of the problem of finding a conception of the university that both remains true to its past while accommodating present social expectations.

1.3. Analytic Framework

In this section, I outline the analytic scheme that I use in Chapters 2 and 3 to describe and compare different ideas of the university. The scheme is based on four very general elements of any conception of education: (1) Student, or who is to be educated; (2) Society, or where the education is taking place; (3) Knowledge, or what is to be achieved through education; and (4) Method, or how the education is accomplished. I owe this scheme to my supervisor, Eric Bredo; John Dewey deploys a similar approach in an early essay. The reader will note that two canonical English “question words” remain. So far as why education is done, considering these four elements helps to reveal the purposes and values served by a conception of education. As I show in Chapter 2, each conception of the university allows one of the four elements to determine the others, reflecting the narrow range of values upon which each conception is founded. As for a “when question,” there are multiple things such a consideration might mean: When in the student’s life? When in the day? When relative to other activities, educational or otherwise? Because all education is going on in time, “when questions” can be folded under the above considerations of student and method.

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104 The “where question” can also be understood in a different way—in what physical location(s) is education happening—but this question about the learning environment is part of the method, the “how question.”

1.3.1. Student

All conceptions of education need a conception of the person who is to be educated. Some specification of the student’s age and assumed background beliefs, skills, knowledge, and abilities is important in describing the starting point of education. Also key is some sense of the expected potential of the student, to have a general guideline for accomplishment and a fair standard of assessment. A conception of how learning takes place psychologically or physiologically as habits are acquired and modified, and how these developmental processes are affected as the student advances in age is important to consider in order to describe how the student is to move from her/his starting point to an actualization of her/his potential.

1.3.2. Society

The student does not live in a vacuum, however: she/he has a life outside of the school she/he attends: friends and family, relationships and responsibilities, membership in or connections to larger social groups such as class, race, gender, religion, and so on. These social aspects of the student’s life place her/him in relation to other (groups of) people in society. Because students are already members of society, their education will have an impact on their present social relations. Moreover, a particular conception of education may assume that the student comes from a certain set of social backgrounds. Questions about the student’s place in society naturally lead to a consideration of what kind of society she/he lives in. The kind of political structure it has, whether aristocratic, democratic, or otherwise, as well as the nature of its economy, have implications for the kinds of social opportunities the student can expect to have open to her/him. Because these societal features form the backdrop in which education takes place and graduates will live, they are a powerful determining factor of educational aims. Finally, the society’s history and hoped or expected future development may also affect a conception of education, in
that educating may be taken to be a step in, for example, preserving what is good from the past, or contributing to present developments, or catalysing radical change in the future.

1.3.3. Knowledge

This epistemological side of education considers the nature of knowledge or skill, what it means to have them, and how to tell when the student has acquired them through her/his education. A philosophical conception of knowledge or skill, whether it comes out as eternal truths to be grasped by the intellect, embodied habitual competence in a range of tasks, patterns of natural phenomena suggested by controlled experiment, or something else, is an important fundamental consideration in a conception of education. Additionally, there are the matters of who counts as an expert or who sets the standards for knowledge. When devising a curriculum, prioritizing this or that subject, there may be some subjects considered important to learn for their own sakes, and others important for instrumental reasons. The society in which education takes place influences this selection of subject matter because of the social opportunities and obligations the student’s education is connected with. The ways in which expert knowledge is systematically organized into disciplines is also a factor in the construction of a curriculum.

1.3.4. Method

This aspect considers how the learning environment should be structured, what makes a good teacher, the kinds of techniques that can be expected to be most effective. There are also considerations of how the student’s interest is to be maintained, how free the student is to set the learning agenda as opposed to how much control is exerted by the teacher. The extent to which students are expected to approach a particular level of expertise bears on how the systematized form of knowledge created and mastered by specialized experts should be presented or introduced to the student. Evaluation, promotion, and graduation procedures, if applicable, are also considerations of method. Indeed, the entire administrative structure of the educational
institution is ultimately a matter of the method used to educate. Connections with society appear when considering the role of governments and corporations in education, to what extent their interests should have influence over the educative process.

1.4. Summary

In Section 1.1, I traced the history of the university from its medieval origins to the Second World War. Multiple times in that history, a divide between intrinsically valued theory and instrumentally valued practice appeared as universities evolved along with changing social circumstances. In Section 1.2, I discussed some developments and challenges the university has faced since the Second World War, most importantly an unprecedented growth of university education and changing public perceptions of the value of university activities. Again, the pattern of theory vs. practice recurred, with the social momentum shifting again toward an emphasis on practical usefulness. In Section 1.3, I introduced an analytic scheme that considers the student, society, knowledge, and method inherent in any conception of education. In Chapter 2, I use this scheme to systematize three conceptions of the university that appear in contemporary debates regarding the purpose of the university. Each conception turns out to have an overriding interest in one of the four elements that dictates the way the rest of the conception falls out. Chapter 3 will discuss the dichotomy between thought and practice into which these ideas of the university fall. Using the educational philosophy of John Dewey, I argue that this conceptual division is ill-founded and unhelpful to addressing the challenges universities now face.
2. Ideas of the University

In this chapter, I use the conceptual framework I introduced in Section 1.3 to analyse three major conceptions of the university in terms of their conceptions of their students, of their society, of the knowledge they impart or produce, and of their educational method. Because the conceptions differ in their emphasis of the four elements, I do not always analyse them in the same order; instead, I begin with the element that is the most fundamental and work naturally toward the others. I arrived at the list of conceptions by consulting various areas of academic and popular literature on the university. Other conceptions exist, and still more are conceivable, especially when axes orthogonal to the divide between theory and practice are considered. The list presented here is based on my judgment of which ideas have the most contemporary influence, which best draw out the divide between theory and practice, which are most easily distinguished from each other, and which I have personally found the most interesting. Each of the three conceptions also corresponds to placing one of the four elements of education in a position of overriding importance. In order to keep the discussion manageable, I concentrate on each conception’s idea of university education. I discuss the other two typical classes of university activities (research and service) only incidentally or as they relate to education, in order to round out the description of each idea and the conceptions of education that obtain thereunder. I also use a relatively narrow selection of writers, in order to avoid discussions of the various differences between authors that appear to favour a particular conception.

Usually, a conception of the university is represented as the ideal or essential description of the university institution, laying out the necessary and sufficient conditions for any institution to count as a university. Such conceptions of the university always have consequences for how one should conceive of actual institutions of tertiary education, and implications for the legal process of recognizing an institution as a university or as something else. That is, some
institutions may, on the one hand, call themselves universities yet fail to match the conceptual definition in their forms and practices, and there is an implicit argument that legal recognition should devise a distinctive category for them. On the other hand, there may be some institutions that do not call themselves universities and are not recognized as such, that yet meet the conceptual definition. It is not my business here, however, to comment on the appropriate legal framework for recognizing this or that institution of tertiary education as this or that kind, or the legitimacy of any particular institution’s claim to be (or not to be) a university. The reader is free to follow the logical implications of my remarks and of the views I detail below into whatever area they please.

In brief, the three ideas I consider are: (1) *Liberal*: the university as a temple of *knowledge* that provides a liberal education; (2) *Scientific*: the university as a research centre that initiates students in the research *methods* of their chosen discipline; and (3) *Economic*: the university as a knowledge factory that trains workers for their roles in *society*. As will become clear, (1) and (2) consider university education to be (primarily) *intrinsically* valuable for its products of *thought*, whereas (3) considers university education to be (primarily) *instrumentally* valuable for its *practical* products. In Chapter 3, I discuss why any conception that falls into

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106 Other potential conceptions of the university that I have chosen not to focus on include (a) *Competitive*: the university as an arena and training ground for intellectual athletes; (b) *Critical*: the university as a haven for social criticism that teaches open-minded political subversion; (c) *Social Justice*: the university as a social advocate and equalizer of social opportunities; (d) *Credential Mill*: the university as a business that sells educational credentials; (e) *Civic*: the university as a capstone school that prepares young adults for responsible citizenship’ (f) *Personal Development*: the university as a place where students complete their maturation into adults by acquiring social, intellectual, professional, and economic skills. For a different and more detailed breakdown of several ideas of the university based on a different analytic framework, see Raymond P. Kybartas, “Ideas of the University: Towards a Classification System Based on Ideal Types,” (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1996). Conceptions differing along different axes include those that turn on the university as a producer of public or private goods, the university as a secular or religious institution, the university as a
this dichotomy fails to meet the criteria posed by the contemporary social situation described in the first chapter.

2.1. Liberal

The liberal conception of the university has its roots in the arts curricula of medieval universities. Its modern incarnation derives from the Oxbridge model of the early nineteenth century and the North American undergraduate curricula that were based on it. The most famous advocate of liberal education is perhaps John Henry Newman, whose lectures in the 1850s on “the idea of a university” were intended to explain and justify the foundation of the Catholic University of Ireland.\(^{107}\) Most of these lectures concentrate on the nature of the university’s relationship to the Church, the importance and relevance of theology to modern scholarly knowledge, and the need for English-speaking Catholics to have their own university. Newman was also reacting to the German and French movements in Europe that were shifting the focus of university education away from traditional subjects studied for their own sakes, and toward learning the methods of the natural sciences or immediate practical applications of knowledge (see Section 1.1).

The liberal university is fundamentally concerned with knowledge 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.”\(^{108}\) The kind of knowledge a liberal university is concerned with is contrasted with “servile” knowledge, which is acquired only to be used for some further end. Newman denies that the distinction


between liberal and servile is one of the pursuits of the mind and the pursuits of the body. Some bodily pursuits are “liberal,” such as Olympic sport (bodily competition for its own sake), some highly intellectual exercises are “servile,” such as medicine (the application of medical knowledge to a person’s health). The liberal university is concerned with liberal intellectual pursuits, so education intended by design to be useful to some line of work, professional or not, is out of the question.\(^{109}\) Under Newman’s conception of knowledge, all the various disciplines of specialized knowledge form parts of a united whole. His justification for this epistemology is theological: “all branches of knowledge are connected together, because the subject-matter of knowledge is intimately united in itself, as being the acts and work of the Creator.”\(^{110}\) (Though it is far beyond the scope of the present work to examine, a secular epistemology might reach the same conclusion.)

In stark contrast to the scientific idea of the university (see Section 2.2), Newman contends that teaching and research are fundamentally different activities: “To discover and to teach are distinct functions; they are also distinct gifts, and are not commonly found in the same person.”\(^{111}\) As such, he argues that the university’s function is “the diffusion and extension of knowledge rather than the advancement,” that is, to teach and not to research.\(^{112}\) For Newman, the advancement of knowledge is best done in academies, where scholars have the freedom to commit themselves wholly to the advancement of their discipline. New knowledge and ideas will feed from the academies into university teaching where they will be taught not by the researchers

\(^{109}\) Ibid., 107–109.

\(^{110}\) Ibid., 99.

\(^{111}\) Ibid., xiii.

\(^{112}\) Ibid., ix.
who produced them but by professional teachers. The situation today is obviously different. Independent research academies, whose members are not formally attached to any universities and support their work from their personal sources of wealth, are less prevalent than in Newman’s day. Moreover, modern liberal arts universities encourage faculty to engage in research, though their resources may be limited when it comes to some disciplines, such as the physical sciences.  

But whether research is done at a liberal university or not, the method of education does not take it to be an overriding concern. Because of the union of the various disciplines of knowledge, the student’s education must introduce her/him to all of their diversity if she/he is to gain a proper appreciation for knowledge generally speaking, and an appropriate diversity of capacities required to possess intellectual virtue. Teaching the student a variety of subjects is especially important given the danger that a narrow or improperly restricted range of subjects may close the student’s mind in some ways:

the drift and meaning of a branch of knowledge varies with the company in which it is introduced to the student. If [her/]his reading is confined simply to one subject, however such division of labour may favour the advancement of a particular pursuit…certainly it has a tendency to contract [her/]his mind. If it is incorporated with others, it depends on those others as to the kind of influence which it exerts upon [her/]him…It is a great point then to enlarge the range of studies which a University professes…and, though [students] cannot pursue every subject which is open to them, they will be the gainers by living among those and under those who represent the whole circle. This I conceive to be the advantage of a seat of universal learning, considered as a place of education.

Thus, the general method of liberal education is the study of a range of intellectual subjects for the sake of learning in itself, in an environment where everyone else is, to varying degrees of

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expertise, engaged in the same worthy pursuit. J.M. Cameron expands on this method of
education, and gives some idea of the kind of knowledge prized by a liberal university. In
addition to scientific knowledge, liberal education gives pride of place to the classic works of
literature, philosophy, and culture, as well as the study of language, the medium of transmission
of human culture. Through such studies, the liberal university is, as Cameron writes, “a part of
the line—truly, I believe, a life-line—that joins us to the entire human past, so far as this is
recoverable, and it is only through our knowing whence we have come that we know who and
what we are.”

Studying the classics provides knowledge of one’s self and one’s society, to complement the knowledge of the natural world provided by scientific subjects. In terms of how
the student is taught, Cameron argues that the best method is to place the student in a situation
defined by a story and a set of problems, and to indirectly assist the student’s learning by asking
a series of questions. This Socratic approach is the primary method of teaching, supplemented by
direct instruction or the student’s own private reading as the subject warrants.

Cameron remarks that Newman’s view of the classics of culture undoubtedly has a Euro-
centric and Catholic bias: “One reason for Newman’s confidence in the future of classical studies
was his view that European civilization…is roughly equivalent to human civilization.”

Accordingly, the works of interest to Newman historically begin with the ancient Jews, Greeks,
Romans, and Christians, and progress through the European Middle Ages, Renaissance, and
Enlightenment. Contemporary Western society, however, is culturally pluralist, especially in

\[115\] J.M. Cameron, On the Idea of a University (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto

\[116\] Ibid., 70–72.

\[117\] Ibid., 21. Emphasis his.
North America, and the view that European society is normative “is quite out of the question.” However, according to Cameron, studying the contributions of Western culture is still an important means to understanding humanity, especially for those from Western cultures but for others as well, because of the global influence of the West. Cameron does not say much about how the contributions of other cultures might be relevant to liberal education in a globalized and multicultural society. In her defence of a liberal curriculum founded on the humanities, Martha Nussbaum argues that the mutual influence of societies worldwide means that liberal education must expand its list of classics to include other cultures. The exact list must vary depending on the social context and the backgrounds of the students, in order to remain relevant to the development of the students’ knowledge both of themselves and of the wider social world globalization has wrought.

On a different social point, liberal study demands that the students’ and teachers’ material needs are mostly looked after, for “the life of liberal study [must be] free of perpetual occupation with small tasks…it is a life of leisure, though by no means a life of idleness.” If the members of the university are not independently wealthy social élites, then their leisurely life dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge will have to be provided for by other means. Student loans, public funding, and private donations are all very important to the continued existence of liberal universities where their students are not primarily from wealthy families. These sources of

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118 Ibid., 22.

119 Ibid., 22–23.


money might be committed to the same values as the university—namely, the intrinsically valuable pursuit of learning—or, what seems more likely, they may be committed to the university because they value other side-benefits of the kind of education offered there. As Newman writes,

> general culture of mind is the best aid to professional and scientific study…the [person] who has learned to think and to reason and to discriminate and to analyze…will not indeed at once be a lawyer, or a pleader, or an orator, or a [politician], or a physician, or a good land [owner], or a [person] of business, or a soldier, or an engineer, or a chemist, or a geologist, or an antiquarian, but [she/]he will be placed in that state of intellect in which [she/]he can take up any one of the sciences or callings I have referred to, or any other for which [she/]he has a taste or special talent, with an ease, a grace, a versatility, and a success, to which another is a stranger. In this sense, then, mental culture is emphatically useful.\(^{122}\)

So while the main object of a liberal university is not utility for ends beyond knowledge itself, Newman maintains that those who receive the education it offers will nevertheless find that their education is useful to their professional lives. These side-benefits to the economy and to society may impress those sources of money that do not share the university’s values, and thereby ensure that the life of leisurely liberal study can be maintained.

Exposure to knowledge and culture have the effect of cultivating an intellectually virtuous disposition in the student. Moral character, for Newman, is not the primary ambition.

However, Newman is in many ways a follower of Aristotle:

> While we are [human beings], we cannot help, to a great extent, being Aristotelians, for the great Master does but analyze the thoughts, feelings, views, and opinions of human kind. He has told us the meaning of our own words and ideas, before we were born. In many subject matters, to think correctly, is to think like Aristotle, and we are his disciples whether we will or no, though we may not know it.\(^{123}\)

In brief, Aristotle’s ethics is concerned with finding the right way to live, which he describes using the word εὐδαιμονία (eudaimonia), variously translated as “happiness,” “excellence,”


“flourishing,” “self-realization,” or “success.” Essential to achieving this best life is the cultivation of virtue, which is divided into the moral and intellectual virtues. Perfecting a human life requires not just knowledge and intelligence, but also a morally virtuous disposition. A life of contemplation—of learning, discussing, and thinking about ideas—which, for Aristotle, is the highest form of human existence, represents a life lived in accordance with both intellectual and moral virtue.¹²⁴ Because of Newman’s Aristotelian outlook, while he does not expect everyone who passes through the liberal university to achieve moral virtue, he does expect they will be helped considerably in doing so: a liberal education “is a real cultivation of mind; and I do not deny that the characteristic excellences of a gentleman are included in it…Certainly a liberal education does manifest itself in a courtesy, propriety, and polish of word and action…but it does much more.”¹²⁵ The main development in the student, however, is still intellectual, which Newman and Cameron think is itself intrinsically valuable.

To sum up the liberal conception of the university, it is an institution where knowledge is esteemed as an end in itself. Students are introduced to a variety of disciplines of knowledge without any concern for their practical use in their post-graduate professional lives, though such practical use is anticipated. These disciplines include not just the discoveries of science but also the study of language and classic works of philosophy and literature. The selection of classics must be relevant to the cultural history of the students without being narrow or chauvinist. A comfortable standard of living without distractions such as employment is required, whether the

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material needs of the university community is supplied by private wealth or public funds. Overall, the student gains in knowledge and intellectual virtue.

2.2. Scientific

Like the liberal idea of the university, the scientific idea conceives of the university as a place where knowledge and ideas are held in the highest esteem. But whereas the liberal university’s purpose is learning and preserving knowledge for its own sake, the scientific university is concerned with the production of knowledge and ideas through efficient, scientific, and specialized means. This preoccupation with the scientific process percolates the entire institution, meaning that this kind of university’s education is fundamentally concerned with the element of method. A. Phillips Griffiths describes the method of education thus:

> The pupil is introduced to [scientific or scholarly] activity by participating in it with someone more advanced who is for the moment more concerned for the state of mind of the [pupil] than for the advancement of [her/]his subject, but who shows the pupil what a concern for the advancement of [her/]his subject amounts to.\textsuperscript{126}

In other words, education at the scientific university consists in the introduction of students to the scientific or scholarly process of one or more specialized disciplines of inquiry. Historically, this conception of the university is owed to the Prussian reforms of Wilhelm von Humboldt, who was influenced by the philosophy of Friedrich Schleiermacher. According to Schleiermacher, the teacher accomplishes this objective by setting an example of scientific inquiry for her/his students:

> The teacher must produce everything [she/]he says before [her/]his listeners: [she/]he must not narrate what [she/]he knows, but rather reproduce [her/]his own way to knowledge, the action itself. The listeners should not only collect knowledge. They

should directly observe the activity of intelligence producing knowledge and, by observing it, learn how to do it themselves.”

Humboldt provides further details:

The university’s domain is what [one] can only find through and within [one]self—insight into science. Freedom is necessary and solitude helpful to this self-act in its own understanding and the entire organization of the university flows from these two points. Attending lectures is only secondary; what is essential is that for a series of years one lives in close connection with like-minded people of the same age, who are aware that in this same place there are many thoroughly learned people, dedicated solely to the elevation and diffusion of science.

In emphasizing the importance of freedom to a scientific university, Abraham Flexner excludes other forms of education that require more direction by the teacher or attention to products that are beyond the advancement of knowledge. According to this conception, “neither secondary, technical, vocational, nor popular education [has a place in the university]. Of course, these are important; of course, society must create appropriate agencies to deal with them; but they must not be permitted to distract the university” from its fundamental purpose of extending knowledge, exploring ideas, and pursuing truth. The key is, as Schleiermacher puts it, “to stimulate the idea of science in the minds of the students, to encourage them to take account of the fundamental laws of science in all their thinking.” In short, education at the scientific

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university demonstrates the methods of specialized disciplines of inquiry in order to bring students to think in the same disciplined way.

These remarks about the method of teaching bring out another detail of the scientific university. Though its educational purpose is to teach the scientific method, its institutional purpose overall is not, in fact, educational. Rather, the fundamental purpose of this kind of university is research, or inquiry, or the pursuit of learning and truth—in a word, the growth of knowledge. Griffiths makes this point explicitly, arguing that the other things that the university does, particularly its social roles such as education and preparation for life, “can be conceived as functions of the university only so far as they are dependent on the central function, the pursuit of learning.”\footnote{Griffiths, “A Deduction of Universities,” 132.}

For Griffiths, inquiry is the university’s essence, and its other functions merely accidents. The advancement of scientific thought is an end in itself, that is, intrinsically valuable. Studies and training that aim at a craft or immediate practical use—that is, forms of education that are designed around activities that are instrumentally valuable—are not appropriate to the university. However, although the conception of knowledge operating in this kind of university is paradigmatically scientific, the institution need not exclude other forms of specialized inquiry. As Flexner argues, the university must have a place for the physical sciences, social sciences, and humanities, especially insofar as they are concerned with advancing their own peculiar forms of scholarship:

Intensive study of phenomena under the most favourable possible conditions—the phenomena of the physical world, of the social world, of the aesthetic world, and the ceaseless struggle to see things in relation—these I conceive to be the most important functions of the modern university. We shall get further with the physical world than with the social world or the aesthetic world, but the difference is only one of degree.\footnote{Flexner, Universities, 23.}
The kinds of knowledge, ideas, and understanding with which the university is concerned are thus not “scientific” in the narrow sense in which the term is nowadays applied, but in the broader traditional sense of specialized and critically appraised knowledge and inquiry. Given these three broad kinds of study and the diversity of specialized subjects within them, it is also important for the university to be a multidisciplinary space. As D.W. Hamlyn suggests, rounding out his analysis of this conception of the university, “an institution concerned with one subject, say theology, would not make a respectable university, since it does not offer a broad enough perspective on knowledge, although it might make an admirable part of a university.”

There are, of course, numerous social consequences of the pursuit of inquiry for its own sake. While some will be practically useful and beneficial, others may cause problems. The scientific university’s relationship with society is therefore a complicated one. Not the least of these complications is that this conception of the university considers the intrusion of social concerns a potential distraction from the pursuit of truth. According to Flexner, even when working on topics that are of public concern or have the potential to benefit or create problems for society, academics must remain distant and disinterested from the applications of their work:

In the social as in the physical sciences, the university is, in so far as scientific effort to understand phenomena is concerned, indifferent to the effect and use of truth…[scientists must] study phenomena without wanting to tell legislatures, communities, municipal authorities, and chambers of commerce what they ought to do at any particular moment about some particular thing.

The same goes for the humanities, insofar as they have their own studies of a scientific character; Flexner’s examples include the study of dead languages, archaeology, history, and art

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criticism. However, he does find a place for social concerns as the stimulus of inquiry. As new knowledge and ideas work their way out into society, people working outside of the university may apply them to solve a set of social problems. These solutions, however, only generate further problems as society adapts. Where these new problems are gaps in knowledge and understanding, academics will be spurred to investigate further—still in a way disinterested in actual practice—but other social problems, such as recalcitrants who refuse to accept scientific findings, are not the concern of academics. Flexner uses the example of medical research:

[Scientists] study the phenomena of disease. What happens [next]? A problem is solved—the problem of this or that infection or contagion. Quite unexpected consequences ensue…Life is lengthened. Thereupon we are confronted by a new crop of diseases…thus has medical science increased, not diminished, its own burden…Nor is this all. There are more people—many more. They must be fed and clothed. Raw materials are needed; the excess of manufactured products must be marketed. Competition becomes more and more intense…Thus science, in the very act of solving problems, creates more of them.

Thus, the interaction of science and society enriches both, but there are limits to appropriate interactions. In order to ensure that academics have the appropriate distance, the university needs to be a particular kind of environment: one guaranteeing time, freedom, and a system of communicating ideas to colleagues. As Griffiths summarizes, the university “demands a great

135 Ibid., 21–23.

136 Ibid., 18–19.

137 At page 21, Flexner seems to contradict his principle of disinterested inquiry in describing a different role of the humanities: social criticism. This additional role might be intended to be the humanities’ equivalent of social problems stimulating new lines of inquiry. However, he explicitly identifies this humanistic form of inquiry as holding society “accountable for the purposes to which larger knowledge and experience are turned.” Flexner appears to intend the critical activities of humanists to be a counterweight to the disinterested attitude of scientists, but his usual line of argument, that important activities not conforming to the scientific ideal should be undertaken at a different kind of institution, does not appear. I am not certain how to interpret this passage, but in any case it is peripheral to my present concern.

deal from the community in which it exists. It demands its keep; and (what may be more difficult to give) it demands its indulgence.”

A few consequences for the relationship between university education and society follow. If students are to learn the disinterested scientific methods of their disciplines of study, they too will need to learn when it is inappropriate to bring personal or public concerns into their thinking. The student’s freedom will, accordingly, mirror the freedom of academics. As Côté and Allahar describe, the programme of study at this kind of university requires a commitment equivalent to a full-time job, which is impossible if students must take on work for pay in order to support their studies. This conception of the university thus supposes that either students come from well-to-do families, or that society will foot the bill for their studies. Finally, Flexner and Griffiths both claim that the cognitive skills and specialized knowledge that students acquire through their studies of intrinsically valuable modes of inquiry will be advantageous in their future lives, extending the claim that disinterested inquiry is of use to society, albeit accidentally.

The scientific university’s conception of society brings out assumptions about the student who attends its educational programme. In terms of how students learn, it is a fundamental assumption of this conception of the university that students learn best by doing, by participating in the same knowledge-producing activities as their teachers: “From the very beginning the pupil must take an active part.” As just mentioned above, the student must have ample time to dedicate to study. The freedom granted to the student assumes that she/he has come prepared to

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139 Ibid.


142 Griffiths, “A Deduction of Universities,” 133.
make the effort required of her/his studies, and already has certain basic study skills, such as reading, writing, arithmetic, and a significant degree of independence. In short, the student is assumed to be a young adult or older who has completed a fairly rigorous secondary education. She/he is not, of course, completely left to her/his own devices, nor is she/he treated as an intellectual equal. But university teachers are considerably less concerned with directing the student than teachers at lower levels of education:

At the university, the student must take chances—with [her/]himself, with [her/]his studies, with the way in which [she/]he works. The freedom of the university does not mean that the professor is indifferent or that at the very outset the student should attack a piece of research independently: on the contrary, [she/]he has, while free, to work through a difficult apprenticeship before [she/]he attains independence [as a scholar or scientist].

Paradigmatically, the student is interested in participating in specialized academic research, whether for the short time she/he spends in university or as a life-long career. There will of course be many students who pass through the university to acquire the skills, knowledge and credentials that such an education provides because of their applications in other vocations. If students who do not go on to a research career find some instrumental value to their university education, well and good. But these students do not set the agenda of the university. The institution offers its programmes of study as a way for students to participate in and acquire the habits of mind associated with the production of knowledge and understanding, which is an intrinsically valuable activity.

To summarize: the scientific conception of the university is founded on the idea that the pursuit of knowledge, understanding, ideas, truth, and so forth is an intrinsically valuable activity best undertaken through specialized disciplinary methods. These methods make up the major

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content of the student’s education as she/he is effectively apprenticed as a researcher. This programme of study requires significant commitment and dedication on the part of the student, for the onus is largely on her/him to learn. The university’s role in society is primarily the production of new knowledge and understanding, which may be in response to social problems but must be undertaken dispassionately. The university is not responsible for producing graduates who will have skills useful to non-academic vocations, except insofar as research training happens to produce useful transferrable skills and knowledge.

2.3. Economic

The economic conception of the university is perhaps the result of pushing the changes described in Section 1.2 to the extreme, which several of the writers I have already cited take to be the most dangerous rival view. Newman argued quite strongly against the view that university education should be primarily concerned with its utility. Flexner, too, was opposed to the idea of a university primarily concerned with providing a programme of education that is useful to students’ professional or personal lives. Collini is particularly concerned with the encroachment of public demands that the university be useful to the economy. These writers agree that university education certainly has practical uses beyond the peculiar academic concerns of the university, but that wider usefulness ought not to be confused for the institution’s narrower purpose. Though they disagree on what that institutional purpose is, they all share the view that the public does not really understand. As Cameron puts it, “The real business of the university and the conditions under which it is best pursued are not easy to explain to a public that stands outside the university world.”\textsuperscript{145} But perhaps it is professors such as Newman, Flexner, Cameron, and Collini who are wrong to cling to older, élitist conceptions of intrinsic theoretical

\textsuperscript{145} Cameron, \textit{On the Idea of a University}, 33.
value when society is increasingly in need of practically useful advanced education. Such is the view of advocates of the economic university.

When society—in particular, society conceived as centred around or identical with the economy—is made the most important element of education, usefulness to that society becomes of paramount importance in education. One way this social purpose manifests as a conception of the university is as an institution that serves the interests of the economy. When a large proportion of the labour force completes a programme of university education, both the students and the society that provides for the existence of that education want the skills and knowledge acquired there to have value for those students’ careers, and thus to the overall economy. The more the economy produces jobs demanding high levels of skill and knowledge, the more important university education will become to its host society, and the more students will attend.

Corporations and governments exert considerable influence over the way the university and its constituent faculties and departments conduct themselves, because they have a vested interest in making sure that universities are teaching the right skills for the available jobs, and an appropriate level of general and transferrable skills in case the economy contracts or changes. Public funding and private contributions from industry sponsors reflect this commitment to economically useful education, as they are a means to stimulate universities and departments to offer the most useful subjects of study. Students and researchers at the university also take an active role in contributing to the economy through entrepreneurship.

\[146\] Other society-centred universities are possible, based on different conceptions of society. On a conception of society concerned with promoting deliberative democracy a university might be concerned with preparing students for responsible democratic citizenship. On a conception of society that places a high value on culture, a university might be concerned with producing and preserving cultural goods (such as art, philosophy, religion, and so on) and in cultivating in its students an ability to appreciate and critically examine such goods. I concentrate on practical service to the economy here because it is the antithesis of theory-oriented conceptions in the present situation described earlier.
The student market is an important factor in this conception of university education. Eager to secure work for themselves, students will invest their time and money into programmes that are likely to get them the careers they desire. The social class of the student is in principle irrelevant to this conception of education; what matters is the careers those students are aiming at. Most of those careers, however, are middle class—graduates of tertiary education generally make double the annual income of high school graduates. University education is assumed to be the final stage of preparation for an adult career—or retraining for a new career—so students will be young adults or older who have already completed a more general education and may have other experience. Students are relatively mobile, moving between academic and external contexts over the course of their education. This lack of lasting commitment to the academic side of the university reflects the typical student’s concern not with learning for its own sake, but with learning the skills needed for gainful employment in a particular career.

The conception of knowledge obtaining at an economic university is one of instrumental value. Knowledge is not assumed, as it is in the liberal (Section 2.1) or scientific (Section 2.2) conceptions, to be intrinsically valuable, except to a minority of people—perhaps professional researchers or those who delight in learning as a hobby of sorts. The ends to which knowledge is put, particularly the economic, industrial, and business-related tasks and activities it makes easier or more efficient, are the source of its value to society. The economic university makes “substantial contributions to local economies through research leading to patentable inventions

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and discoveries, faculty spin-off ventures, and technology transfers.”

Units within the university organization serve to transfer or mobilize the knowledge produced by researchers, so that it can be used effectively to further the economy or other social goals. Examples of such units include York University’s knowledge mobilization office “that enhances the two-way connection between researchers and research users,” and York University’s industry liaison office that offers services to “facilitate research, realize the commercial, economic, and social potential of research outcomes, and to create a culture of industry-engaged scholarship and entrepreneurship.”

Chrisman, Hynes, and Fraser suggest that the programmes of study offered at the university should be organized according to the sets of skills and expertise demanded by different lines of work, requiring collaborative interdisciplinary programmes of study.

Moreover, they suggest that interdisciplinary collaboration for commercial applications should be common among researchers. With no pretence that some knowledge is valuable intrinsically, the curricula on offer shift according to economic demands, mediated by funding sources, including student interest.

The *method* of education at an economic university reflects its close links with industry and business: “The design of degree courses and student experience in general should articulate

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152 Chrisman, Hynes, and Fraser, “Faculty Entrepreneurship and Economic Development,” 280.

with the needs of business and emerge from a strong working partnership with employer organisations.”¹⁵⁴ Because experience and skill is more useful on the job than book-learning, degree programmes “include appropriate integrated placements, internships, and work-based learning opportunities of significant duration” that count for course credit.¹⁵⁵ Learning by reading or traditional lecture is de-emphasized, in favour of modes of delivery that make more apparent the connection of the content learned to practical applications thereof. To assist entrepreneurial students and faculty, “universities should organise networking events for nascent entrepreneurs where they can meet investors as well as dedicated financing events that provide budding entrepreneurs with the opportunity to pitch their ideas to investors.”¹⁵⁶ At the same time, in order to get better value for the students’, governments’, and industries’ money, more expedient and efficient methods of delivering content are encouraged. Students expect to be able “to access material whenever and wherever they want through whatever device they choose…universities risk irrelevance if they fail to meet student expectations in this area. Universities have to provide an experience for students that justifies their presence on campus.”¹⁵⁷ Finding ways to allow students to pick up job skills regardless of their location or situation is important to attracting more students, so online and distance education methods are embraced by the economic university.


¹⁵⁵ Ibid., vii.

¹⁵⁶ OECD, A Guiding Framework, 11.

In summary, the economic university is organized around service to society by contributing to the economy through research, education, and entrepreneurship. Public and private investors can exert a degree of influence over the university by choosing to fund activities they believe will best contribute to the economy. Students are interested in acquiring the job skills required for a successful middle class career. The knowledge produced and taught at the university is considered valuable because of how it can be used, especially in furthering economic or other social aims. Practical knowledge and experience, including applied research, are more important than theory or basic research. Methods of education incorporate experience on the job and emphasize the workplace context over the classroom environment. Traditional lectures are less important than more efficient and convenient ways for students to pick up job skills, such as online learning.

2.4. Summary

In this chapter, I discussed three idea of the university: liberal, scientific, and economic. The first two, founded on their conceptions of knowledge and method, respectively, take their activities to be fundamentally intrinsically valuable theoretical pursuits. The third, founded on a conception of society closely tied to the economy, takes its activities to be fundamentally instrumentally valuable practical pursuits. This conceptual impasse between theory and practice is the source of contemporary debate regarding the purpose and direction of the university. In the next chapter, I take up the theory versus practice dichotomy and its association with intrinsically versus instrumentally valuable education, lives of leisure versus labour, and activities of mind versus body. Using the philosophy of John Dewey, I argue that the theory versus practice dichotomy cannot be strictly maintained, and propose a Deweyan conception of the university in place of the three conceptions discussed in this chapter.
3. Beyond Theory versus Practice: A Deweyan Idea of the University

In this chapter, I turn to a direct examination of the philosophical theme that has informed this entire thesis: the separation of theory and practice in education and the tendency to treat them as unrelatable. I consider the conceptual separation of theory and practice, and its connection to leisure and labour, mind and body. I return to the contemporary debate over the university’s educational purpose, casting it, again, as a shift from theory-oriented to practice-oriented conceptions of the institution. After showing how it relates to the conceptions of the university discussed in the previous chapter, I deploy the philosophy of John Dewey to break down the dichotomizing conception of theory and practice. I then switch to a positive account of a university not preoccupied with being primarily theoretical or primarily practical, using Dewey’s conception of education to sketch a new idea of a university that both integrates theory and practice and maintains an unbroken feeling of identity with past iterations of the university. I close by discussing some ways in which a Deweyan university would address the contemporary challenges discussed in Chapter 1, suggesting that this idea of the university is particularly well-suited to the present situation.

3.1. Theory versus Practice

The division in philosophy of theory and practice, as well as the greater esteem held for the former over the latter among intellectuals, are ancient dogmas, traceable (in the Western tradition) to the Greek conception of the Good.158 Plato’s world of ideas and Aristotle’s life of contemplation both conceive of objects of theory, that is, of thought, as timeless and independent of ephemeral human life. The rational part of the human soul—for the Greeks, the distinctive feature of humanity—enables us to glimpse these higher and eternal things, when the material

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158 A complete survey of this divide in the history of philosophy is not possible here. I have chosen to highlight only a few representative and influential works.
needs of our plant- and animal-like aspects are looked after and we can devote our minds to theory. Practice, which always aims at an end beyond itself, such as a product to be used or some further action, is considered a lesser pursuit. In Aristotle’s words:

> 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.  

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The division of theory and practice is also a manifestation of a dualistic conception of mind and body, as Thomas Aquinas shows in his description of liberal (theoretical) and servile (practical) arts:

> whatever habits are ordained to...works of the speculative reason, are, by a kind of comparison, 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).  

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Theory is thus the free activity of the mind concerning eternal objects, whereas practice is the subservient activity of the body to other ends. Because theory has no further end, it is considered intrinsically valuable—that is, its value is not to be found in some object or activity it makes possible, but only in itself. Practice, on the other hand, is only instrumentally valuable, because its object is always something beyond itself; the value of practical activity is the product or further activity that it creates or makes possible. As Talbot Brewer puts it, “the purpose of the servile arts is to keep oneself alive and healthy. The purpose of the liberal arts is to engage in

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activities that are worthwhile in themselves, activities that can give point to remaining alive and healthy.”\textsuperscript{161}

3.1.1. Theory and Practice in the Ideas of a University

The theory and practice dichotomy appears clearly in the ideas of the university I discussed in Chapter 2. Newman’s liberal idea explicitly draws from the Aristotelian and Thomist conception of theory in its foundation as a “place of teaching universal knowledge.”\textsuperscript{162} Newman does argue, as I mentioned, that there can also be liberal pursuits of the body, such as purely athletic pursuits; the domain of a liberal university, however, is the liberal pursuits of the mind—theory. The purpose of education at a liberal university is to introduce students to knowledge as an end in itself, and to participate in the free life of the mind exploring the eternal objects that liberal (theoretical) knowledge is concerned with. It is an attempt, in other words, to actualize Aristotle’s ideal life of contemplation, of devotion to the intrinsically valuable pursuit of theory.

The Schleiermacher–Humboldt scientific university comes at theory from a different angle, concentrating on the method of arriving at knowledge. The purpose of education is not primarily to learn but to learn how to learn, to acquire the habits of mind needed for effective theoretical study—paradigmatically, the scientific method. The scientific university’s conception of education is more practically minded than the liberal conception, since it assumes that students will actively pursue knowledge beyond what they learn from their professors and their engagement with course material. However, the pursuit of theoretical learning is still conceived


\textsuperscript{162} Newman, The Idea of a University, viii. Emphasis his.
as an end in itself that should not be subservient to further ends. Applications of knowledge are not the business of the producers of knowledge.

Against these two theory-oriented universities, practice rules at the economic university. All of its activities are connected in some way with furthering economic ends, which themselves are only part of a chain of further ends and means, since a strong economy is valuable because of the benefits to society and the organizations and individuals that society consists of. Research, whether it is basic or applied, is primarily valuable because of the practical ends it may serve, and not because theory may be intrinsically valuable pursuit. Education is concerned with ensuring that students have the skills and knowledge they require for a life spent working, for a life of activities that always have ends outside of themselves and might not engage the mind to a great extent.

The clash between liberal or scientific conceptions of the university and the economic conception rests on this divide between theory and practice. Of course, no actual institution perfectly meets the criteria of any of the three conceptions I have discussed. As complex social institutions, they evolve and operate in response to their social environment; only an isolated and self-sufficient university might be able to remain true to its conceptual foundations. Actual universities are an inconsistent mix of these and other conceptions. However, as I discussed in Chapter 1, the contemporary social environment is turning toward a view of the university that is closer in alignment to the economic conception and more concerned with instrumental ends, putting public demands of the university in tension with older theory-inclined conceptions that have prevailed in many places since the nineteenth century. Brewer describes a series of conflicts between business-minded non-academic university administrators, who endorse something like the economic conception of the university, and faculty, who are on the side of liberal or scientific conceptions. According to Brewer, this conflict
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...When a college retreats from the liberal to the servile arts, it announces to its students that times are too lean to permit four years of indulgence in something capable of giving point to remaining alive and healthy, and that they must concentrate on the task of enhancing their material means.  

The same conflict between adherents of theory and of practice is the subject of Collini’s frustration:

From wholly laudable motives, we constantly fall into the trap of justifying an activity [university education]—one initially (and perhaps for long thereafter) undertaken because of its intrinsic interest and worth—as something which we do because it yields incidental benefits which are popular with those not in a position to appreciate the activity’s intrinsic interest and worth.  

The clash between theory and practice in conceptions of the university is certainly nothing new. As I described in Chapter 1, the history of the university is punctuated by a pendulum swing between conceptions of the university that favour intrinsically valuable theory and instrumentally valuable practice, and the present situation is another swing in favour of the practical side. The vastly larger and ever-increasing population of students, drawn from a larger proportion of the university attending age grade and, accordingly, a more diverse segment of the population that is interested not just in participating in the life of theory, if at all, but more so in the practical benefits they can get from higher education. The educational disengagement reported by Côté and Allahar is unsurprising in this context: the form of university education they are concerned with is of the scientific sort, and hence not the practice-minded education their disengaged students are after. Justifying the expense of the university to governments is also a debate that turns on theory and practice. As Collini writes, “in a climate where so much of the discussion of

163 Brewer, “The Coup that Failed.”

164 Collini, *What Are Universities For?*, 91.
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 [economic] prosperity,” rather than some intrinsic value that can be ascribed to university education.\(^{165}\) The changed public perceptions of university activities are a driver for the economic side of the conceptual conflict. Whether through more applied research and applicable basic research, or through more practically useful education, various groups in society are demanding more from universities than those tending toward the liberal or scientific conceptions can provide, and pushing them toward the economic conception.

3.1.2. Against the Separation of Theory and Practice

The entire theory versus practice debate over the idea of the university, however, is founded on faulty ground. In what follows, I deploy John Dewey’s arguments from *Democracy and Education* to show that theory and practice should not be aggressively separated. Some of Dewey’s arguments are, in fact, directed more broadly at various problems in the philosophy of education, and not exclusively or primarily at the theory and practice impasse. In some cases I am applying Dewey’s direct arguments against the divide, in other cases I am following his line of reasoning in other areas to achieve the same objective. The following is in some ways, then, a reconstruction of Dewey’s thought rather than simple exegesis, and does not follow his order of exposition. Dewey has further arguments and restatements of the same ideas in other areas of his corpus; I have chosen to focus on *Democracy and Education* because it is conveniently comprehensive.

One way Dewey’s philosophy can break the division of theory and practice is by undermining their exclusive association with intrinsic and instrumental value. Consider Dewey’s conception of an aim. On his account, “an aim implies an orderly and ordered activity, one in

\(^{165}\) *Ibid.*, 90.
which the order consists in the progressive completing of a process.”\textsuperscript{166} That is to say, when an agent has an aim, she/he desires to bring about some result through a series of coordinated actions that has some definite point of completion. To reach completion, each part of the process needs to be done not merely by mechanically following the steps one-by-one but with consideration for the next steps and the aim in view. This element of foresight involves continual observation of the conditions under which the agent is acting, ordering the steps accordingly, and considering alternative steps to reach the end in case they may be more efficient or conditions make the initial plan of action impossible.\textsuperscript{167} Instead of “assum[ing] ends lying \textit{outside} our activities; ends foreign to the concrete makeup of the situation; ends which issue from some outside source,” a good aim is based in the actual conditions obtaining in the agent’s situation.\textsuperscript{168} Moreover, a good aim can be adapted in light of those conditions, but can also be used to alter those conditions. Aims imposed from without lack such flexibility. Because of their disregard for the context of a particular person’s activity, “the external idea of the aim leads to a separation of means from end,” that is, the things done to achieve the desired result become “but a necessary evil; something which must be gone through before one can reach the object which alone is worthwhile.”\textsuperscript{169} Dewey’s conception of means and ends is much more fluid, reflecting his philosophy’s central theme of continuity:

Every means is a temporary end until we have attained it. Every end becomes a means of carrying activity further as soon as it is achieved. We call it end when it marks off the

\textsuperscript{166} Dewey, \textit{MW} 9, 108.

\textsuperscript{167} \textit{Ibid.}, 109.

\textsuperscript{168} \textit{Ibid.}, 111. Emphasis his.

\textsuperscript{169} \textit{Ibid.}, 113.
future direction of the activity in which we are engaged; means when it marks off the present direction.\textsuperscript{170}

Which aspects of an activity count as means and which as ends depends on how one is thinking about the activity at the moment. When producing a text, for example, the overall end of the activity is the completion of that text; this end defines the hoped for future result that the writer is striving toward through the means of writing. “Writing,” however, can be divided further into a series of means and ends. Writing a section of the text is a means to completing the text, but during the writing of that section it is an end to be achieved. Pushing a pen through the proper strokes is a means to writing a word, but during the pushing of that pen to write that word, the pen-pushing becomes the end of a different set of means: a series of complex physiological processes coordinating thought, memory, eyes, hand, arm, and so on.

The fluidity of Dewey’s account of ends and means reappears in his account of intrinsic and instrumental value. These two forms of value correspond to two senses of the word: “value” as “to prize, to esteem” and “value” as “to appraise, to estimate.”\textsuperscript{171} Whereas something intrinsically valuable simply is good, something instrumentally valuable has to be good for something. One cannot ask what an intrinsically valuable thing is good for, beyond itself, and as such it cannot be compared in value to other things. But just as means and ends can undergo a Gestalt shift, things with intrinsic value can be reconceived according to instrumental value, and vice versa. Such shifts occur when a circumstances change in a way demanding a change in aims. Dewey provides an illustration, which is worth quoting at length:

\begin{quote}
We may imagine a [person] who at one time thoroughly enjoys converse with [her/]his friends, at another time the hearing of a symphony; at another the eating of [her/]his meals; at another the reading of a book; at another the earning of money, and so
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{170} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{171} \textit{Ibid.}, 247.
on…each of these is an intrinsic value…Each is the specific good which it is, and that is all that can be said. In its own place, none is a means to anything beyond itself. But there may arise a situation in which they compete or conflict, in which a choice has to be made. Now comparison comes in…Raising [comparative] questions means that a particular good is no longer an end in itself, an intrinsic good…The question is now as to its status as a means of realizing something else, which is the invaluable of that situation. If a [person] has just eaten, or if [she/he] is well fed generally and the opportunity to hear music is a rarity, [she/he] will probably prefer the music to eating…If [she/he] is starving, or if [she/he] is satiated with music for the time being, [she/he] will naturally judge food to have the greater worth. In the abstract or at large apart from the needs of a particular situation in which choice has to be made, there is no such thing as degrees or order of value.\footnote{Ibid., 247–48. First emphasis his, second emphasis mine.}

In the context of university education, the conclusion I have italicized above cleaves the unions of intrinsic value with theoretical study and of instrumental value with practical study. Dewey’s account shows how each can be valued in both ways. Studying knowledge or the scientific method might be valued intrinsically, as Newman or Schleiermacher intended, and need no further justification. Or it may be justified by reference to the instrumental uses such study may serve. Equally, while learning skills for a particular career might be valued instrumentally as a means to attaining that career, it may also be valued intrinsically, simply as a good, enjoyable, engrossing thing to be doing. A student might take to the intrinsic value her/his studies can have, whether the subject is Latin, biology, or business; if under the circumstances she/he does not find such value in her/his study, however, the teacher can assist in finding some way in which the study can serve some further end in which she/he \textit{does} have an interest sufficient to value that end intrinsically.\footnote{Ibid., 249.} The argument that theoretical study, whether liberal or scientific, is simply intrinsically valuable in all circumstances, whether or not one appreciates it, and practical study is simply instrumentally valuable and therefore less worthy, does not hold water.
Dewey also attacks the theory and practice dichotomy directly by considering the social implications of a life dedicated to either one—the theoretical life of leisure or the practical life of labour—and how changing social conditions have shown that the division, both in terms of class and of modes of study, is a false one. Dewey argues that the valuation of the former over the latter comes from the division of social classes into those who have their needs provided and those who have to work for a living—that is, between the aristocrats and the working classes of artisans, labourers, farmers, slaves, and so forth. The assumption that people will take up a life of one kind or the other, according to their station, is the ultimate source of the divide between intellectual forms of education, such as the liberal and scientific models, and practical forms of education, such as the economic model. This social divide was so set in the minds of ancient and medieval Europeans that they reproduced it in their philosophy. Aristotle, for instance, saw the servile status of the general population as an indicator that those people had degenerate souls, taking more after the plant-like or animal-like parts rather than the distinctively human rational part. Some people, on his account, were servile by nature, rather than because of the structure of ancient Greek society.\footnote{Ibid., 261.}

Dewey agrees that the free life of ideas would be superior to one of mere mechanical labour and servitude, but finds fault in assuming the necessary separation of theoretical and practical pursuits:

If there was an error, it lay in supposing that there is a necessary separation of the two: in supposing that there is a natural divorce between efficiency in producing commodities and rendering service, and self-directive thought; between significant knowledge and practical achievement.\footnote{Ibid., 264–65.}
For Dewey, any practical activity can engage intelligence and any theoretical activity can at the same time further practical ends. In fact, such a mixing of theory and practice in education is desired, because it enriches both practical and intellectual abilities. On the one hand, “narrow modes of skill cannot be made useful beyond themselves; any mode of skill which is achieved with deepening of knowledge and perfecting of judgment is readily put to use in new situations and is under personal control.” And on the other,

The most direct blow at the traditional separation of doing and knowing and at the traditional prestige of purely “intellectual” studies…has been given by the progress of experimental science. If this progress has demonstrated anything, it is that there is no such thing as genuine knowledge and fruitful understanding except as the offspring of doing. 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. [People] have to do something to the things when they wish to find out something; they have to alter conditions…The laboratory is a discovery of the conditions under which labor may become intellectually fruitful and not merely externally productive.

Because experimental science informs nearly every aspect of modern life, including the more labour-intensive vocations, Dewey argues that an integration of both theory and practice in life is possible for all. Achieving this goal will require more than just correcting the philosophical blunder of splitting theory and practice: the social division that is partly responsible for the philosophical division must also be corrected. The advent of democracy, however, represents just such a possibility: “a truly democratic society [is] a society in which all share in useful service and all enjoy a worthy leisure…the educational transformation is needed to give full and explicit effect to the changes implied in social life.” So the educational integration of theory and

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176 Ibid., 267. Emphasis mine.
177 Ibid., 284. Emphasis his.
178 Ibid., 265.
practice is not only possible, but is an important part of the transformation of society from aristocratic to democratic.

Dewey also undermines the metaphysical separation of mind from the body and external world, which, as I mentioned above, is fundamental to the theory and practice divide, in its connection to the liberal and servile arts and the lives of leisure and labour. This dualistic conception of mind is as a higher substance that exists independently and merely uses the body as mechanism for experiencing and interacting with the physical world, which it represents to itself as knowledge:

mind is set over the world of things and facts to be known; it is regarded as something existing in isolation, with mental states and operations that exist independently. Knowledge is then regarded as an external application of purely mental existences to the things to be known, or else as a result of the impressions which this outside subject matter makes on mind, or as a combination of the two. Subject matter is then regarded as something complete in itself; it is just something to be learned or known, either by the voluntary application of mind to it or through the impressions it makes on mind.\(^{179}\)

Dewey’s conception of mind, however, is opposed to this dualism: “mind is not a name for something complete by itself; it is a name for a course of action in so far as that is intelligently directed; in so far, that is to say, as aims, ends, enter into it, with a selection of means to further the attainment of ends.”\(^{180}\) In other words, “mind” is just the active foresight, observation of conditions, planning, and consideration of alternatives that are essential to acting on an aim. As such, it is not something isolable from activity, from having aims and interests. The advocates of purely theoretical study err in assuming that mind is “complete in itself, ready to be directly applied to a present material,”\(^{181}\) whereas the advocates of purely practical study are wrong to

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\(^{179}\) *Ibid.*, 137.

\(^{180}\) *Ibid.*, 139.

\(^{181}\) *Ibid.*, 140.
downplay the importance of intelligence to practical pursuits. The inseparability of mind from activity in the world is ultimately the source of the educational benefits of integrating theory and practice.

3.1.3. Summary

The ancient philosophical division of theory and practice and esteem for a life dedicated to the former over the latter is the crux of the debate over the concept of the university. The liberal and scientific conceptions defend the side of a leisurely theoretical programme of study; the economic conception defends the side of a labour-oriented practical programme of study.

Dewey’s philosophy, however, shows that the conception of theory as an intrinsically valuable leisurely pursuit of mind, opposed to practice as an instrumentally valuable labour-intensive bodily pursuit, fails on multiple levels. Both theoretical and practical study can be intrinsically and instrumentally valuable, depending on the circumstances and the student’s interest. The association of theory with leisure and of practice with labour is vestige of European aristocracy, which is out of alignment with democratic convictions. Moreover, by integrating the two pursuits in education, both the theoretical and practical sides of education are enriched. Finally, the metaphysical dualism of mind and matter is simply fallacious: mind is not an independently existing substance to be applied directly to theoretical subject matter. Instead, mind appears only in intelligent activity—that is, in practice. Theory and practice do not exactly collapse to the same thing, but nor are they strictly separated. Both represent important aspects of any activity, however, and so should not be separated in education, including university education.

3.2. A Deweyan Idea of the University

The strict divide of theory and practice thus dispatched, it remains to propose a new conception of the university not so philosophically constrained. Since Dewey’s arguments against the theory versus practice divide are part of a longer consideration of education more generally, it is
reasonable to take his conception of education as a starting-point. In this section, I first summarize Dewey’s educational philosophy in terms of the four elements of student, society, knowledge, and method. Next, I consider the features of a university context that remained constant across all three of the conceptions I discussed earlier, with the assumption that these features will remain in place in a Deweyan conception of the institution. I also consider how a Deweyan university would integrate and enrich the worthy aspects of the liberal, scientific, and economic universities, before providing a summary sketch of the Deweyan university in terms of the four elements. I conclude by suggesting that a university founded on Dewey’s conception of education might be able to overcome the contemporary challenges universities are now facing in Western nations.

3.2.1. Dewey’s Conception of Education

Unlike the three conceptions of university education I considered earlier, John Dewey’s conception of education gives important consideration to all four elements of education, instead of taking one as fundamental and orienting the purpose of education around it.¹⁸² This more comprehensive conception of education arises because of Dewey’s commitment to a conception of education not just as preparation for life, but as a way of life. Accordingly, he considers all aspects of life in his account, and shows how they all provide opportunities for educative experience.

¹⁸² The progressive education movement that Dewey’s ideas partly inspired rests on a student-centred conception of education, but Dewey explicitly rejected many of the progressive movement’s views as misinterpretations of his work. See Dewey, “Experience and Education,” LW 13, 3–62.
Dewey’s conception of experience forms the basis of his conception of the student. Experience, in a nutshell, is how we interface with the world. It has two sides, one active, one passive:

On the active hand, experience is *trying*—a meaning which is made explicit 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.

The educative value of an experience depends on how well the active and passive sides are connected: in order to learn from experience, the agent has to understand the connection between what she/he does and the consequences that result as she/he continues her/his activity. Dewey illustrates with a simple example. If a child sticks her/his finger into a flame, unless the child understands the subsequent burn and pain as the result of her/his movement, the burn is just some physical change and the pain just some misfortune. The child has an experience if she/he realizes that sticking her/his finger into the flame was connected to the burn and pain. Through this experience, the child learns that sticking one’s finger into a flame means a burn and a burn means pain. Having learnt this connection between touching fire and pain, and presumably already understanding pain of this kind as a thing to be avoided, the child develops a habit of trying not to touch flames. In education more generally, the same idea applies, albeit in a much more complex situation with a far greater depth and breadth of subject matter. Education consists in the growth of experience, both in quantity and quality, as the student actively pursues a variety of aims of interest to her/him intrinsically or instrumentally. As a result, the student learns how

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to act in a variety of situations in order to bring about a variety of outcomes—in other words, the student acquires habits. In order to go on learning, however, those habits must not become fixed. The danger of fixed habits is another reason for bringing the theoretical and practical together:

Habits reduce themselves 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. Routine habits are unthinking habits...the acquiring of habits is due to an original plasticity in our natures...Routine habits...are habits which put an end to plasticity.  

In other words, the need to be flexible mentioned earlier in Dewey’s conception of aims applies. To keep habits plastic and to remain open to the greatest number of valuable experiences, an experimental attitude is crucial. This attitude represents an openness to new things that could potentially reveal new connections and better ways of doing things: “we never get beyond the trial and error situation. Our most elaborate and rationally consistent thought has to be tried in the world and thereby tried out.”  

When carrying on in life beyond formal education, the same openness to new experience ensures that the former student will continue to grow in experience, and therefore as a person.

Dewey’s conception of *society* makes education necessary for its continuation and improvement. These social aims take off from more general aims of life: to preserve itself by using and adapting to its environment. Social groups behave in a similar way, attempting to preserve their distinctive way of life against the natural and social environments they encounter. However, the members of a social group gradually age and die. As a result, “there is the necessity that...immature members be not merely physically preserved in adequate numbers, but that they be initiated into the interests, purposes, information, skill, and practices of the mature

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185 Ibid., 53. Emphasis mine.
186 Ibid., 157–58.
187 Ibid., 4.
members: otherwise the group will cease its characteristic life.”\textsuperscript{188} In other words, the social group requires some form of education in order to survive. To pass on the fruits of the group’s experiences, younger members have to be brought to have experiences of their own. The most direct way of ensuring that the student has a cognate experience is by setting 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 [she/]he feels its success as [her/]his success, its failure as [her/]his failure.”\textsuperscript{189} The school, of which the university is one kind, is a special place set up to effect these experiences when society becomes so complex that a simplified learning environment is needed. The relatively controlled environment of the school also serves to sieve out undesirable features of society: “as a society becomes more enlightened, it realizes that it is responsible \textit{not} to transmit and conserve the whole of its existing achievements, but only such as will make for a better future society.”\textsuperscript{190} Education serves not just to keep human society going, but also to improve it, as I suggested earlier in discussing the importance of education in the transition from aristocracy to democracy.

Breaking down the metaphysical dualism of mind and matter has a further consequence of breaking down the division of \textit{knowledge} and \textit{method}. So long as dualism holds, knowledge (subject matter) is something external to be put into the mind by some method of instruction, which can be developed by considering the nature of the mind and without a consideration of specific subject matter. But on Dewey’s account of mind, since thinking is a directed movement of subject matter to a completing issue, and since mind is the deliberate and intentional phase of the process, the notion of any such split

\textsuperscript{188} \textit{Ibid.}, 6.

\textsuperscript{189} \textit{Ibid.}, 18.

\textsuperscript{190} \textit{Ibid.}, 24. Emphasis his.
[between subject matter and method] is radically false...Method means that arrangement of subject matter which makes it most effective in use. Never is method something outside of the material.\textsuperscript{191}

In other words, because knowledge can only come about through activity that produces the appropriate experience, method cannot be considered apart from subject matter, for the production of conditions conducive to the right activities requires a consideration of the particular knowledge the experience is to produce. Moreover, the student’s own peculiarities have to be considered in bringing about the right conditions—the student’s previous experiences, interests, and capacities are all important considerations to making the subject matter a valuable experience. Consciousness of the student’s situation is important to avoid conflating the way knowledge appears to the teacher, who already has it, with the way it appears to the student. At the outset, the teacher’s expert knowledge is remote from the student’s experience: “The problem of teaching is to keep the experience of the student moving in the direction of what the expert already knows.”\textsuperscript{192} The student learns first by doing, by engaging directly with the use of subject matter, then by communicating with others to enrich her/his direct personal experience with reports of the experiences of others. As the student’s experience grows deeper and broader, more and more connections among the things she/he has learnt become clear, and her/his view of the subject matter approaches systematized expert knowledge. Putting knowledge and method together makes it possible for the teacher to create the right conditions for the growth of the student’s experience in the appropriate direction.

3.2.2. Applying the Deweyan Conception to the University

So much for Dewey’s conception of education in general. In order to apply it to the university context, the distinctive features that make the institution a \textit{university} and not some other

\textsuperscript{191} Ibid., 171–72. Emphasis his.

\textsuperscript{192} Ibid., 191.
educational institution must be laid out. I take these features to be what remains constant across the three conceptions of a university I considered in Chapter 2, and which need not be shed away by a rapprochement of theory and practice. As I see it, there are three such features, each necessary but not sufficient conditions for an educational institution to count as a university. Maintaining these common features is important to the unbroken feeling of identity I mentioned in Chapter 1.

The first necessary feature is that the university be an institution of tertiary education. This classification implies that university students will be young adults or older, having passed through earlier systems of education tailored to younger ages. In the Middle Ages, before the widespread development of primary and secondary education, universities also served to educate younger students at what we would now consider the secondary level, but with a large network of public and private schools present in modern industrialized nations, universities are no longer concerned educating this age cohort through their programmes of study. Tertiary education is assumed to be the final stage of formal education—though some graduates may seek further formal education, it will in most cases either also be at the tertiary level, or it will be a lesser commitment than the years-long processes of primary, secondary, and tertiary education. All three conceptions of the university take their status as tertiary forms of education for granted, and since a Deweyan university would enter the educational system in their place, it should also be a tertiary institution. The most obvious consequence for applying Dewey’s conception of education to the university is the more advanced experience that can be assumed of older students. There will still be considerable individual variation, but the university teacher will in general have students of more advanced ability and with greater understanding of the connections between things. Accordingly, university students will be further on their way to

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193 Rainer Christoph Schwings, “Student Education, Student Life,” HUE 1, 195, 197.
achieving expert knowledge. But their age also presents a risk: unlike children, who are naturally curious and open-minded, adults tend to slip into fixity of habit, undermining the possibility of meaningful new experience—that is, of education. A university education should take care to ensure that, as it is furthering the development of the student’s capacities and knowledge on the basis of their prior experience, it also stimulates students to question and unsettle old habits in response to new experiences.

The second feature, which universities have had in common since their medieval beginnings, is the idea of the teacher as a “master” (or doctor, professor, lecturer, reader, and so forth) in a specialized field of inquiry. Universities initially developed as a replacement of earlier arrangements between independent expert teachers and interested students, formalizing their relationship into a structure similar to a medieval guild or other corporation. In some cases, as in Paris and universities modelled after it, the students and masters were both members of the university; in other cases, as in Bologna and universities modelled after it, the university consisted only of the students, who made arrangements with independent teachers and the teachers’ own, separate, associations. In any case, the idea that the university’s teachers are experts in their field and contributors to the creation of new knowledge has persisted throughout the university’s long history. Pace Newman, the liberal university’s teachers are also researchers, though their educational duties are more important. In the scientific university, the teachers are primarily researchers, and teachers only second. At least some of economic university’s teachers are researchers, too, though they are more concerned with non-academic applications of their work than in the other kinds of university. A Deweyan university would also preserve this

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194 Dewey, MW 9, 55.

195 Verger, “Patterns.”
connection of research and teaching—if anything, breaking down the division of theory and practice makes the university more hospitable to research, because of the link between knowledge creation and purposive, practical activity. Furthermore, the more advanced knowledge of university students warrants a greater level of expertise in their teachers, so that they may better assist their students in furthering their studies. Having researchers as teachers can also potentially serve as a practical counterbalance to highly theoretical research. Ideally, the university researcher would interpret their field in terms that make sense to the student and spark an interest (intrinsic or instrumental) in it, and interpret the student’s developing expertise, style, and abilities in ways that may be valuable to the advancement of the researcher’s field and applications of it beyond education.¹⁹⁶

The third feature of universities is their multidisciplinarity. That is, the university brings together experts not just in one field, but multiple fields. The medieval paradigm consisted of faculties of arts, medicine, law (canon and civil), and theology, but since then fields of study have proliferated and diversified to include an ever-larger constellation of disciplines. The liberal university requires a diversity of disciplines in order to introduce students to the breadth of human learning. The scientific university’s commitment to research in general also commits it to representing multiple disciplines, from which students may choose for their apprenticeship. Because the economic university is concerned with mobilizing the fruits of disciplinary and interdisciplinary research, the more fields represented the more opportunities the university has for generating economic value, either through a greater variety of research applications or teaching a wider range of employable skills. A Deweyan university would also be multidisciplinary, if only because of historical and scientific connections between existing disciplines. But a Deweyan university’s multidisciplinarity would also enable new connections

¹⁹⁶ Thanks to my supervisor, Eric Bredo, for this point.
between the various fields of specialized inquiry to be discovered. Making such connections would help researchers solve common problems. Students would learn in an environment marked by intellectual diversity, so even if their studies were to take a more specialized course, the presence of other disciplines might serve to reveal more connections to them, enriching their experience.  

With respect to the fundamental differences between the three conceptions, a Deweyan university would capture aspects of all three in way that, without the theory and practice divide, enriches each. The liberal university’s esteem for knowledge and culture as its own end has its place in the Deweyan university, both for those who find intrinsic value in such study and as part of the educational endeavour of enriching experience with as many meaningful connections between things as possible. The scientific university’s love of scientific methods appears in the Deweyan university as well, still as a model for inquiry and potentially intrinsically valuable activity, but tempered by a concern for living one’s life experimentally. The breakdown of the sharp divide between theory and practice opens the way for intrinsic value to be found in practical, job-oriented education as well, without detracting from the practical value of such learning. The deprecation of such practical pursuits disappears with the understanding that free intelligent thought can and should be applied in those lines of work, which also releases practical work from the servility that an overly economic conception of society produces. At the same time, the instrumental practical value of liberal or scientific education need not be begrudgingly acknowledged as an “accident” that pales in comparison to the essential theoretical character of those studies. All in all, the three conceptions’ central aims of appreciating knowledge, learning methods of inquiry, and contributing to the economy, come together in the Deweyan university

197 Thanks again to Eric for helping me clarify these points.
without conflict and, indeed, make each a more valuable contribution to life. This form of university education would be liberal, scientific, economically useful, and more.

To sum up the Deweyan university, it would be an institution dedicated to the deepening and broadening of human experience. Its *students* would be young adults or older, taking advantage of the last major formal educational opportunity for experiential growth. Taking off from their already developed habits, capacities, skills and knowledge, their education would consist in firming up and fine-tuning their abilities, growing towards expertise, while attempting to maintain a childlike plasticity and openness to new experience. The university’s relationship with *society* would be two-sided. On the one hand, the university would serve to preserve and pass on the findings of specialized inquiry that inform many aspects of how that society functions, as well as the formal educational aim of ensuring the continuation of that society’s traditions. On the other hand, the university would serve to improve and change society through scientific discovery, by not reproducing (and actively challenging) problematic or unjust features of society, and by ensuring that its graduates have a rich understanding of the connectedness of things. While the economy is an important aspect of society, to which the useful experience generated at the university can contribute, it is not the exclusive social interest of the university. The experience students gain through university education should assist them in later life not just in pursuing ends instrumental to their lives, but also in pursuing the things they find intrinsically valuable—to paraphrase Brewer, not just to carry on living, but to make life worth living. The *knowledge* pursued by the Deweyan university’s faculty and students would be not just theoretical and valued for its own sake, nor merely practical and valued for its usefulness. Knowledge is the result of purposive activity fully engaging the agent’s intelligence, so it is both theoretical and practical. Students and faculty might find intrinsic value in this or that subject of study, but the instrumental uses of those subjects would also be important in order to fully
appreciate their value. The educational method is not simply a general approach, divorced from the context in which experience takes place. The individuality of the student, the subject matter, and the environment are all important considerations for the teacher, whose job is to set up the material conditions in which the student acts, in order to assist the student in having the appropriate experiences and placing those experiences in relation to other things in the student’s understanding.

3.2.3. The Deweyan University and Contemporary Challenges

The Deweyan university may be well and good as an idea, but it would be so much idle theory if it did not speak to the actual contemporary circumstances of university education. By way of closing, I now return to the challenges I outlined in Section 1.2 to suggest that a Deweyan university might be able to address them, showing that a Deweyan university may be particularly suitable to our time.

Rather than a source of lament, the growth toward mass (and even universal) participation in university education among young adults is favorable to the Deweyan university’s support of a more egalitarian, democratic society. The liberal and scientific universities, because they were founded on élite systems of higher education, encounter difficulties beyond just cost in transitioning to larger cohorts of students. The economic university is one potential response to these changing conditions, but it does nothing to change the leisure–labour divide, either in philosophy or in society. Moreover, the economic university loses sight of the intrinsic value of university education. The Deweyan conception of education is explicitly in the service of breaking down restrictive social barriers and the related divide of theory and practice. The greater diversity of students would be a boon, since it provides a greater range of experience in the community, from which students can enrich their own experience. While a steadily larger proportion of the students may not find theoretical study engaging,
whether because of different abilities or different interests, the Deweyan university can still provide for meaningful growth in their experience by more carefully considering their interests and needs, instead of committing itself to an abstract ideal of an intrinsically valuable education and hoping that students will see the light, or else committing to an ideal of purely instrumental economic value and hoping that students will be content. A Deweyan university is thus particularly well-suited to the continuing growth in university enrolment.

The financial strain universities are under, unfortunately, is a far more complex matter that cannot be solved simply be changing the concept of education obtaining at the universities. Economic and demographic factors beyond the universities’ control will continue to complicate the university’s attempts to tap in to public and private money to fund its activities. This challenge is not a strike against the Deweyan university, however, since any conception would encounter the same financial limitations. Working out how to make any form of university education a fiscally plausible endeavour is matter beyond the scope both of this thesis and of my, or anyone’s, ability alone.

Finally, the changing political values with respect to the university can be accommodated by the Deweyan university. Both the older view that the university produces intrinsically valuable public cultural goods and the newer view that the university produces instrumentally valuable (public and private) economic goods are appropriate with regard to the Deweyan university—so long as one does not override the other and the two views inform each other. The breakdown of the strict divide between theory and practice reveals that the university can produce both sets of goods at once. Some argument, such as the present work, may be needed to pull public and intellectual values back toward the centre, where both theoretical and practical goods are important endeavours of the university. But the shift in values does not represent a threat to what the Deweyan university stands for.
Of course, without actually testing the Deweyan idea of a university in practice, these claims remain speculative. Lee Benson, Ira Harkavy, and John Puckett offer several examples of what they claim to be applications of Dewey’s conception of education to the university context, but they seem mainly concerned with mobilizing the university to be useful to its local community, rather than comprehensively undermining the divide between theory and practice in the idea of a university.\(^{198}\) Time will tell if a Deweyan philosophy of higher education bears fruit, should the resources be directed to such an experiment.

### 3.3. Conclusion

In Chapter 1, I described how, throughout the history of the university, the institution has been pulled back and forth between more theoretical or more practical conceptions of education. Social and institutional changes since the Second World War have precipitated another swing toward the practical, which has provoked responses from academics devoted to more theory-centred conceptions. In Chapter 2, I examined two conceptions of the university founded on intrinsically valued theoretical activities, and one founded on the emergent emphasis on practical activities. In Chapter 3, Using John Dewey’s accounts of aims and values, labour and leisure, and mind and matter, I argued that the strict division of theory and practice assumed by these conceptions of the university is philosophically unsound. Building on Dewey’s conception of education, I sketched a Deweyan idea of a university, and suggested how it may be able to overcome some of the contemporary challenges faced by universities in the West. This new idea of the university remains to be tested, but at least it is conceptually better founded.

Bibliography


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