

The Epistemic Goods of Higher Education

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Article abstract

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The Epistemic Goods of Higher Education

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Abstract: In this paper, I investigate two clashing perspectives regarding the good of the university: a socio-economic and an epistemic perspective. I position current writing on the university in the philosophy of education as being largely socio-economic and contrast this view to an earlier tradition of writing about the university that I position as mostly epistemic. Following on from this discussion, I review the university's role in the distribution of social and epistemic goods. I hold that the university directly controls only the latter, not the former and hold that whatever socio-economic roles the university plays in society, it must do so through the distribution of knowledge in society. Next, I explore what this means for the university's socio-economic functioning: I hold that seeing the good that the university distributes as knowledge places limits on its socio-economic functioning. Lastly, I ask what the university can do to promote epistemic justice in how it conducts teaching and research. I hold that one of the most important things that the university can do in the name of epistemic justice is to educate others (especially employers) about the true worth of a university degree.

1. Introduction

Universities are experiencing a crisis of purpose on both sides of the Atlantic—as work by scholars as diverse as Nussbaum (2010) and Collini (2012) explains. Sometimes, the crisis takes the same form: for instance, how to balance applied against fundamental research and teaching, how to balance free against civil expression, and how to balance the university's role in educating a select group of knowledge workers against its mission to educate everyone. Sometimes, the issues are different: universities in North America are far more mindful of problems created by the unequal racial make-up of student bodies, and faculties and universities in the UK are more sensitive about class. Increasingly, however, philosophers who write about higher education have begun to zoom in on the social role that the university plays in the distribution of goods, power and position in society, and a body of literature is growing on the university's great responsibility in distributing fair access to its campuses and lecture halls. This approach—of the university as a conscious social actor—contrasts with a different (and older) approach to the university: that of the university as a *place apart* from society, politics and the economy, where students are formed not as citizens and workers, but as *scholars*. According to thinkers like Newman (1873), Jaspers (1959) and Oakeshott (1967), the university is essentially a space for scholarship and a university education is not firstly meant as a preparation for life as citizen or worker.

In this paper, I contrast what I call “socio-economic” and “epistemic” approaches to the good university and hold that each faces a special problem. I hold that socio-economic thinking focuses too closely on the social credentialing function of the university and does not give enough attention to the fact that the university's core business is the propagation of knowledge. On the other hand, I hold that

epistemic thinking faces the challenge of explaining what the value is of the disinterested pursuit of knowledge to (1) the society that hosts and supports the university and (2) to the majority of students at the university who do not go on to become academics themselves. Extending earlier work (Kotzee, 2013; Kotzee & Martin, 2013), I provide an epistemic account of the good of the university that remains sensitive to the social and political challenges in the area by incorporating the promotion of epistemic justice as part of the university's role.

2. Political Approaches to the Good of the University

As we all know, a degree is today seen as a requirement to joining (or staying in) the middle class. (Carnevale et al., 2011) More so, a degree from an elite university is often seen as a passport to career or political success. And the widespread unfairness that we encounter in access to universities (and the elite universities in particular) is felt around the world. Recently, philosophers like Fullinwider and Lichtenberg (2004), Anderson (2010), and Brighouse and Swift (2006) have stressed the link between attending university and one's social, economic and political chances in life. They focus on the unfairness that follows when the chance to go to university (and the elite universities in particular) is unequally distributed, and evaluate the extent to which it is incumbent on the university to change its admissions and educational policies in order to promote fairer socio-economic outcomes for graduates. Consider how philosophers who write about the university address the following four major themes that have emerged in philosophical writing about the university in recent years.¹

2.1 Higher Education, Life Chances and Equality of Opportunity

Philosophers of education who write about the university often write about the influence of attending university (or particular elite universities) on life chances and on how to distribute the opportunity to attend university fairly. Brighouse and McPherson, for instance, stress how the distribution of university education influences access to the high-status professions and to the social and political elite more generally (2017, pp. 1–2). Shields (2018) locates injustice in the distribution of university education in the injustice in the distribution of elite secondary education, and Voigt (2007, 2017) explores how the choices of disadvantaged students are shaped by social pressures (either not to attend university or only to attend a less prestigious university). A focus on the link between a university education and life chances is perhaps best illustrated in the work of Fullinwider and Lichtenberg (2004). They argue—persuasively—that the question of how university places should be distributed depends on what the university is ultimately *for*. They investigate the very different missions that universities have taken upon themselves over the years (for instance, to serve a particular local community, a particular cultural group, a particular profession, etc.) and conclude that the university as such has no one exclusive mission (p. 37). Still, Fullinwider and Lichtenberg tacitly prioritise the university's social role broadly speaking over its possible other roles. In one revealing passage, they

¹ The following is intended as a representative, not a complete survey of the state of philosophical writing about the university today.

write that the mission of universities depends not just on what a particular university takes its mission to be,

[but also] central roles they have come to play in our society ... in distributing basic goods such as income, status, and rewarding work ... From the point of view of students, parents, and many in the workforce, these are among the most fundamental missions of colleges and universities. (p. 43)

Fullinwider and Lichtenberg conclude that universities should work harder to “level the playing field”—that is, to make competition for jobs and social position fairer. The sentiment is entirely understandable and we need not disagree. However, the assumption underlying this conclusion bears pointing out. That it is the duty of the university to help level the social playing field would only follow if its major role were indeed the socio-economic role of helping to distribute life chances fairly. If the university’s fundamental role were really something completely different, we would not expect of the university to help equalise life chances for students. Compare: If the essential role of the university were to make Nobel Prize-winning discoveries and nothing else, no-one would *blame* the university for not levelling the social playing field as well. This is not to argue that producing Nobel Prize-winning research *is* the fundamental role of the university. It is simply to notice the same point that Fullinwider and Lichtenberg make: what the social duty of the university is depends on what its fundamental role is, and if the university’s duty is equalising opportunity, this must be because its fundamental role is in whole or in part socio-economic.

2.2 Affirmative Action

Another perennial concern in writing about justice in higher education is affirmative action. Fullinwider (2018) holds that, while affirmative action was first a concern for workplaces, the university soon became one of the most high-profile sites for the application of affirmative action policies. A variety of reasons have been presented as to why the university should work for social justice through its admissions efforts (and why this might require forms of affirmative action in admissions). Moses (2010, pp. 218–221), for instance, distinguishes four broad kinds of argument. The first two are counted as moral justifications of affirmative action: “remediation” rationales (the need to compensate for *past* discrimination) and “social justice” rationales (that stress the importance of greater racial integration, equality and fairness in *current* society). Meanwhile, the other two provide instrumental reasons for employing affirmative action programmes: “economic rationales” and “diversity rationales” (aimed at, respectively, economic progress and the promotion of diversity). And Anderson sketches four different justifications of affirmative action: affirmative action as compensation, as promoting diversity, as blocking discrimination and as promoting integration (2010, p. 135). Because the aim of affirmative action admissions policies is not only to equalise life chances between all citizens prospectively, but also to remedy particular forms of racial injustice that affect a particular group of citizens retrospectively, the debate about affirmative action in university admissions is different from the debate (above) about the equalization of life chances for all.

Still, whatever one’s exact take is on the justifiability of affirmative action, the rationale for affirmative action is still socio-economic, and the same underlying assumption shapes debates about affirmative action in university admissions. It can only be part of the role of the university to secure emancipatory political, social and economic goals for minority groups if the main good that the

university provides indeed includes the socio-economic good of mediating or promoting social justice between majority and minority groups in society.

2.3 Student Fees and Debt

Another issue that has received increasing attention in discussions of the university in philosophy of education is the issue of ever-rising student fees and the increasing debt that students run up to fund their university education. A number of philosophers consider this issue. Brighouse sketches his thinking about how higher education should be funded in terms of the place of higher education in promoting a meritocratic society (2004, p. 4). As he points out, in a meritocratic order, position and reward should be distributed not on the basis of one's social background, but on the basis of talent and effort. Brighouse holds that a fees regime in which higher education is either funded out of a graduate tax or is means-tested will help maintain a meritocratic order. In his own discussion of the higher education funding debate, Bou-Habib (2010, pp. 488–492) fits university education into the scheme of Rawls's theory of justice. Adopting Rawls's prioritarianism, Bou-Habib holds that the taxpayer is obligated to support higher education to the extent that this benefits the worst off; at the point that taxpayer support does not benefit the worst off any longer, the beneficiary should pay (2010, p. 491). And Martin (2016) explicitly asks what kind of a good higher education represents. Is it a consumer good that is appropriate to be bought and sold on a market? Or is it a "welfare good" in which the state must take an interest to make sure it funds it, subsidises it, or at least ensures that it remains affordable in some way? Martin holds that the discussion we saw in section 2.1 (on higher education, life chances and equality) tacitly assumes that it is alright for higher education to be traded on a market and that the only thing that we need to do is to regulate this market in order to assume that everyone has a fair opportunity to purchase higher education. However, Martin holds that higher education is more like a welfare good and is therefore not fit to be traded on the market *simpliciter* (2016, pp. 9–12).

Those writing about student fees and debt also make a central assumption about the role of the university: it only follows *that* the university should rearrange funding and fees in a meritocratic, prioritarian or equality-promoting way *if* the university indeed has the socio-economic role of promoting social justice through its fee regime.

2.4 Higher Education and Civic Education

A last theme that garners significant attention among philosophers of education who write about the university is the link between higher education and civic education. For instance, like Dewey (1916), Gutmann sees the whole education system as a form of "conscious social reproduction" (1987, pp. 14–15) of our democratic political system. In line with Dewey and Gutmann's views of education, many see the role of the university mainly in the political light of how university prepares students for citizenship. A good representative of this way of thinking today is Martha Nussbaum. In books like *Cultivating Humanity* (1997) and *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (2010), Nussbaum defends a liberal education (and particularly an education in the humanities) as being especially important to democracy. Nussbaum criticises much contemporary thinking about the nature of the university for focusing too much on economic benefit and not on good citizenship. She does not hold that the influence of the university on life chances is unimportant. But she is afraid that the focus on

this aspect cuts out preparation to live a flourishing life and to be a good democratic citizen (2010, p. 9). Nussbaum sees the value of a university education—and especially an education in the humanities—as that of creating citizens who are skilled at thinking and reasoning. As she writes:

That is the general task of the liberal arts college or university in our era, as I see it: to cultivate the humanity of students so that they are capable of relating to other human beings not through economic connections alone, but through a deeper and wider set of human understandings. (2004, para. 13)

It is clear that Nussbaum is sceptical of the university's role as an economic institution, focussed on training the workers of the future, and sees the university's role instead as cultivating humanity. However, the question is what "humanity" means and it is clear that Nussbaum conceives of humanity broadly as citizenship. In particular, she advocates for liberal arts colleges and universities to teach *global* and not only *national* citizenship (2002, p. 295).

Other authors push Nussbaum's ideas regarding the university's role in fostering good citizenship further. For instance, White holds that the university's function is to "create citizens" and to "lead political debate" (2012, p. 125), Metz holds that the proper aim of a university education is fostering harmony and community throughout society (2009, p. 183) and Altman (2004) sketches the goal of study of philosophy at university mostly as the development of citizenship. Authors who see the good of the university as preparing young people for citizenship quite clearly also view the good of the university as a socio-economic good.

What does philosophical writing about the university in the context of life chances, affirmative action, student fees and citizenship have in common? The common thread is that writers who write about the university in this light view the function of the university as *socio-economic*: it views the university as contributing to society by equalising economic opportunities, correcting past injustice, spreading society's financial burdens fairly and fostering good citizenship. However, is this the only or the best way to look at the good provided by the university? Writing about the affirmative action debate, Michael Sandel notes:

The affirmative action debate reflects competing notions of what colleges are for: To what extent should they pursue scholarly excellence, to what extent civic goods, and how should these purposes be balanced? (2009, p. 183)

Sandel opens up the question of what the good provided by the university exactly is or ought to be. Like Nussbaum, Sandel is sceptical of universities being run for profit or being used by the rich and powerful to purchase an economic advantage for their children. But, in a different way, one can be equally sceptical about those who see a university education as essentially providing opportunities for the disadvantaged in society to climb the social and economic ladder. Even the best-intentioned advocates of widening access to university *also* see the point of a university education as securing access to a job. After all, advocates of widening access to university see that wider access as a way to unlock access to the high-status professions and to the political elite for students who were previously locked out. Surprisingly, it seems that those on the right who see university education as a legitimate way for

families to invest in their children's future earnings and those on the left who view the university as a mechanism to re-engineer the distribution of power and privilege in society are agreed about one thing (at least): *the good provided by the university is mainly the socio-economic good of securing access to jobs and social position*. What they differ about is the (not inconsequential) question of *who* should get the university education that provides the access route to those jobs and positions.

3. Epistemic Approaches to the Good Provided by the University

While it is much less frequently written about today, pre-dating the socio-economic conception of the good of the university is an older tradition of studying the university as an institution that makes it not a central social actor, but that sets it *apart* from society and politics. Authors who write in this vein about the university include Newman, Jaspers and Oakeshott.²

Newman (1873) and Jaspers (1959) each wrote a book entitled (in English) *The Idea of the University*. They held that, by investigating the idea (or the ideal) of the university, one could learn much about how universities should be organised and run. Newman saw the proper function of the university as the pursuit of truth through scholarship, writing that the university is fundamentally a place of “teaching universal knowledge” (p. 7). Moreover, Newman held that the pursuit of this knowledge is to be undertaken not for its practical benefit, but because knowledge is good in itself. Newman contrasted “liberal knowledge” and “useful knowledge.” Knowledge, he wrote,

may resolve itself into an art, and terminate in a mechanical process, and in tangible fruit; but it may also fall back upon that reason which informs it, and resolve itself into philosophy. In one case, it is called useful knowledge, in the other liberal. (p. 137)

Newman held that the university is not there to teach useful knowledge (that is, practical knowledge) but liberal knowledge.

Much like Newman, Jaspers held that “[t]he University is a community of scholars and students engaged in the task of seeking truth” (1959, p. 19). For Jaspers, the “university” is not an institution with a specific name, place or facilities; it is any institution that unites a group of people who dedicate themselves to the search and transmission of truth in scientific terms (p. 3). For Jaspers, the essential function of the university is to serve as a space for the operation of the freedom of the intellect. Moreover, in order to be a space in which the intellect can *really* operate freely, Jaspers held that the university needs to keep itself apart from practical concerns (both economic concerns like how best to make profits or produce goods, and political concerns like how best to govern).

Oakeshott (1967, p. 137) also saw the university as a community of scholars who live and work together. They do not all have exactly the same interests—part of the worth of this community is that they are diverse. The scholars in the community study different disciplines and, by investigating truth from different perspectives, are capable of conducting a conversation with one another that is mutually enriching (Fuller, 2003, pp. 46–47). However, the fundamental role of the university, for Oakeshott, is to serve as a venue in which different scholars could search for truth in the unique way demanded by

² Other writers writing about the university in this vein include Phillips Griffiths (1965) and Hamlyn (1996). See Kotzee and Martin (2013).

their discipline; for Oakeshott, too, this requires that the university keep itself apart from day-to-day economic or political concerns.

Fundamentally, Newman, Jaspers and Oakeshott all saw the university as a site for scholars to do scholarly work, and all three of them were interested in how the university should be organised in order best to carry out this work. In conceiving matters like this, Newman, Jaspers and Oakeshott also located the value of the university not in what it does for society but what it does for its own sake. The university does not exist in order to serve practical purposes (and this includes social, economic and political purposes), but to host a particular form of intellectual life—that is, its own. Newman, Jaspers and Oakeshott’s approach to the university also contains a particular idea about the relationship between the university and politics. For these writers, the university must stand above or away from politics. The university’s function is only the advancement of scholarship; it should not be subservient to politics or involve itself with politics, because, if it did so, it would lose the independence to pursue truth that makes it a “true” university.

It must be acknowledged that this vision of the “true” university as being apolitical is today viewed as old-fashioned. Wyatt holds that, as early as the publication of the English translation of *Der Idee der Universität* in 1960, commentators saw Jaspers’s view of the university as essentially conservative. This is because, on Jaspers’s picture, the university is there to *preserve* intellectual tradition and to pass it on from generation to generation—a “conservative” picture if there ever was one. Moreover, the picture is rather cold to the interests of university students; after all, on this picture of the university, the task of the student is not to make a good life for him or herself after university, but to become a vehicle for the preservation of intellectual tradition by being trained to be an academic in a particular discipline. Indeed, Burwood holds that the teaching we encounter at university, on Jaspers’s view,

pays little direct attention to the needs of the student in the wider world (i.e. to the needs of the student qua employee or qua citizen or even qua rounded human being) and pays even less attention, or perhaps none at all, to the needs and expectations of third parties such as employers or other outside “stakeholders” ... this teaching is aimed at an exceedingly small number of elite students; viz., those who continue in their subject disciplines after graduation. (2009, p. 487)

A particularly selfish picture of the university emerges from Newman, Jaspers and Oakeshott’s work: The university’s mission is fundamentally to carry on its own search for truth, and the vast majority of students are only there to serve as conversational companions before leaving the university (with only a few remaining one day to replace their masters).

Newman, Jaspers and Oakeshott seem to have treated this problem in similar ways. Newman held that, despite the fact that the university first looks to its own survival, the cultivation of a liberal mindset in the young was nevertheless also conducive to the formation of “gentlemen.” Jaspers agreed, more or less. Without using the same class-based language, he, too, held that by giving them an essentially academic training, the university would *in addition* help to prepare them for public life. And Oakeshott saw the time of receiving a university education as an interval in someone’s life when they could dedicate themselves to intellectual study before having to earn a living (Williams, 1989, p. 389).

Despite holding that the university is for academic study alone, it seems Jaspers, Newman and Oakeshott all acknowledged that, in practice, the university will inevitably serve as a sort of training ground for privileged young people, preparing them for entry into public life. Jaspers was more aware of the problems associated with this view than Newman. He held, for instance, that it was not a

particular problem to give some young people but not others a university education because those who had been privileged enough to receive a university education would, because of that education, work even harder in the service of truth, and thereby serve the whole of society (a form of *noblesse oblige*). Oakeshott ducked the issue of the relationship between the university's function of providing knowledge as an inherent good and its political function. He held that it is not appropriate to ask which particular people or how many people should receive a university education. Williams summarises Oakeshott's idea like this:

The reason for this ... is because of the profound and intimate relationship between becoming educated and becoming personally enriched or more fully human. It would be as inappropriate for society to prescribe the numbers of educated persons, as to prescribe the numbers who should be personally enriched. (1989, pp. 387–388)

Whether the dodge is successful is highly questionable. The problem is that, by refusing to open up or answer the question of how many students, or which students, should attend university, Oakeshott cuts off the possibility of debate about how the university shapes life chances and whether we should change the provision of university education such that that education reaches more (or different) people. By not questioning how many students or which students should go to university, Oakeshott risks leaving the fates of both the privileged (with their easy access to university) and the disadvantaged (who struggle to make it to university) unchanged. It is no surprise that many see in the thought of Newman, Jaspers or Oakeshott a tacit apology for the *status quo* in the distribution of university education.

4. The University and the Distribution of Social and Epistemic Goods

Above we contrasted two positions about the good of the university: Is the good that the university provides to its students the *socio-economic* good of greater or fairer social or economic opportunity? Or is it the good of gaining scholarly knowledge (which is valuable for its own sake)?

A natural way to see the issue is as one of a clash between the instrumental and intrinsic value of a university education. Brighouse (2000) and Swift (2003) distinguish between education's "instrumental" and its "intrinsic" value. Education is a means to secure many other goods in life; levels of education impact positively on, for instance, income, social connectedness, longevity and health. It is clearly valuable to pursue an education because more education leads to these benefits—education has instrumental value. However, education also has value purely as education, no matter what other benefits follow from having this education. We say that to be educated enough to understand and appreciate art, science and culture is a good in itself because these things lead to a richer and more fulfilling life—education has intrinsic value. Brighouse and Swift (2006) hold that much of the task in deciding what distribution of education *is* boils down to balancing education's instrumental and intrinsic benefits.

In Kotzee (2013), I saw the distinction between education's socio-economic and epistemic goods like this and identified education's socio-economic goods with instrumental goods and its epistemic goods with its intrinsic goods. I sketched the question as whether education's *real* value is its

instrumental or intrinsic value and started to offer an argument that the intrinsic value of education is more important than the instrumental. This was a wrong turn. The identification of the intrinsic benefits of education with knowledge is not exact. This is because knowledge itself can be pursued both for instrumental and intrinsic reasons. For instance, I may find it intrinsically valuable to know how an internal combustion engine works and may pursue this knowledge only for the intrinsic value that knowing this has for me; alternatively, I may not value this knowledge very much intrinsically, but may value it highly instrumentally (because it helps me to better service my motorcycle, for instance). Almost any piece of knowledge can be valued (depending on one's motives) instrumentally or intrinsically; many of the instrumental goods of education are, indeed, knowledge.

More productive than putting the issue in terms of instrumental and intrinsic value is to focus in on the nature of the instrumental benefits of education and how they work. In section 2, we encountered a number of perspectives on the university according to which the good of the university is mostly socio-economic. According to these views, education generally (and higher education in particular) is a space in which life chances are shaped or access to jobs or social and political position regulated. This is education's instrumental value in action: the education one receives is instrumentally valuable because the better one is educated, the better are one's chances of securing a good job or a good social or political position. However, notice that one's education does not lead *directly* to these other goods. At least in the abstract, one's education gives one *knowledge* that then helps one secure these other social goods. To see this, let us focus on the role that higher education plays in securing access to better paid, higher status jobs for graduates. According to the standard picture of the relationship between university education and employment, the employer chooses to give a certain job to a university graduate because they assume that the graduate has more economically useful knowledge than the non-graduate. In making this judgement, the employer might be wrong: it might not be the case that this graduate (or indeed all graduates) indeed know any more than a particular non-graduate. However, the employer at least *thinks* they are right: they use the graduate's university degree as a proxy for how much the graduate knows or, at least, as a proxy for how productive and useful they think the graduate will be in that job.

To see that this is indeed the case, consider two cases:

1. The auto-didact: the auto-didact has not received an education in field X; however, through self-study, they have acquired sufficient knowledge of X to work productively in that field.
2. The academic cheat: the academic cheat acquired an educational qualification in field X through cheating; they have no real knowledge of X and are not capable of working productively in that field, despite holding a formal qualification in X.

Having identified the auto-didact as an auto-didact and the academic cheat as an academic cheat, who would the rational employer appoint to perform a job in field X? Surely they would appoint the auto-didact. What this shows is that having undergone an education formally speaking (such as having attended an educational institution and having satisfied the rules of that institution sufficiently to be awarded a qualification) is just proxy for what is really valued, that is, the knowledge that one acquired through being educated. In fact, it is useful to distinguish, when it comes to the value of any kind of education (not just higher education), not just two different kinds of value, instrumental and intrinsic,

like Brighouse and Swift already have. It is also important to distinguish between two different kinds of *education*: education in the formal sense, that is, having attended a particular educational institution and having satisfied the formal requirements to be awarded a qualification by that institution; and education in the substantive sense, that is, the knowledge and understanding that one gained as a consequence of studying at the formal educational institution.

It is worth emphasising the distinction, because thinking about the university mainly in terms of its socio-economic benefits can all too easily slide together two things. Universities admit students to a programme of study, successful completion of which it rewards with a degree. Following completion of their degree, students then use the degree as a credential to secure a job. It is a simple (some would say lamentable) fact that the job market attaches more value to a university degree than to some other educational qualifications. But the question of how a degree is perceived in the marketplace is not something that the university itself determines or, indeed, directly aims for in its educational efforts. The fact is that the university system distributes an education in the substantive sense and other people place a certain value on that education. The relevant valuers are, for instance, the employers who appoint certain young people (but not others) to jobs, the politicians who recruit certain young people (but not others) into political structures or simply the mass of the middle and upper classes who accept certain young people (but not others) as being one of their class. The university does not directly get anyone a job, a political position or a class position. The only thing the university does is to issue a degree certificate, and other people then view this degree certificate as signalling something about what the holder *knows*. The important point is that both education's instrumental and intrinsic value work *through* knowledge: by being educated, one comes to know something and, because of what one knows, one then becomes more likely to reap certain instrumental or intrinsic benefits.

In section 2, we saw that the question “Who should go to university?” can only be answered once we have an answer to the question “What good does the university provide?” If the good that the university provides is not socio-economic, but epistemic, the unavoidable question of the distribution of university education becomes: “Who should have the knowledge that is taught at the university?” This is still a burning issue for the university to resolve. Indeed, scholars who see the university's role as mainly socio-economic may hold: of course the task of the university is to distribute knowledge, but who it distributes its knowledge to shapes socio-economic outcomes so that, in the end, its function in society is after all socio-economic. What difference does seeing the good of the university as knowledge really make? We turn to this question next.

5. Justice and Injustice in the Distribution of Knowledge

The question of how the university should distribute knowledge (the question of how it should select its students) is part of the broader question of justice in the distribution of knowledge. In epistemology, this question is receiving new attention.

Coady (2010, p. 104), for instance, explains that debates about the distribution of knowledge could mirror those in political philosophy about the distribution of social goods. Coady speculates that an “epistemic difference principle” borrowed from Rawls would determine that the best distribution of knowledge in society is a distribution where the epistemically worst-off (those who know least) have the most knowledge possible and it would be just for society to regulate the distribution of knowledge to

the advantage of the worst-off. On the other hand, a more historical perspective borrowed from Nozick would resist attempts to “redistribute” knowledge but would accept as just any arrangement in the distribution of knowledge that was the result of legal discovery of knowledge and legal transfer of knowledge. In a possible debate between Rawlsian and Nozickian approaches to the distribution of knowledge, Coady chooses no side; he merely shows that the distribution of knowledge is amenable to a kind of thinking that we are more used to finding in the realm of social goods.

Coady points out that one can think about justice in the distribution of knowledge in two ways. Firstly, one can identify justice and injustice in the distribution of knowledge plain and simple. There are, for instance, people who know much more than most other people in society. There are others who know little or, at worst, can only ever come to know very little because they have received little by way of education. This, Coady holds, is a justice issue: it is unjust that some people, probably because of the great educational opportunities that they have had, know much more than others who, perhaps through the fact that they lack educational institutions or information sources (like books and libraries), seem doomed to ignorance.

Going further than Coady in asking what constitutes justice in the distribution of knowledge, Kurtulmus and Irzik attempt to define the “the epistemic basic structure of society”; they hold that this epistemic basic structure consists in how “science and education, media, libraries open to the public, and those government agencies and offices that carry out research or publish basic statistics” are configured and governed (2017, p. 129). They ask three questions about whether our epistemic basic structure is just:

1. Production: Is there well-conducted research about the questions that ordinary people have an interest in?
2. Dissemination: If so, have the findings of this research been disseminated? Can people access them? How costly is it for her to access them? Have the results of research been presented in a way that ordinary people can comprehend and evaluate?
3. Ensuring individual capability for assimilation of knowledge: If people can materially reach the resources, have they been provided with the requisite educational background and intellectual skills to understand and evaluate them? (p. 135)

It is clear that the university can do much for justice in the fields of production and dissemination. The university is one of the most important institutions in which research is done. Moreover, as institutions that are state-supported (either directly or through government research grants) and that conduct research in the public interest (rather than for profit), the university is ideally placed to do research that is not only well-conducted but is genuinely in the public interest. Moreover, university research governance systems exist to ensure that the research is responsibly conducted.

Likewise with dissemination. The university is already well-placed to disseminate its research and, in fact, there are ever greater pressures on academics to publish their research. Whether their research is presented in a way that ordinary people can comprehend and evaluate is a different matter. Arguably, the university can do much more to target the general public, rather than other academics, through its publications. This is not just an issue of marketing, but is actually one of epistemic justice: making sure that its research conducted in the public interest is communicated effectively to that public.

Lastly, the university clearly plays a fundamental role in “ensuring individual capability for assimilation of knowledge,” that is, in educating people to understand the knowledge it disseminates.

Through its educational programmes, the university of course helps to educate its students to understand the knowledge it disseminates. Moreover, some of the university's students will go on to become educators or public opinion-formers themselves, so that, either directly or at one remove, the university greatly impacts people's "individual capability for assimilating knowledge."

We can clearly have many and varied debates about how the university affects the "basic epistemic structure of society." *However*, seeing the essential good distributed by the university as knowledge and casting the question of the distribution of a university education as a question about the distribution of knowledge does colour the discussion. In particular, seeing the good distributed by the university as knowledge sets a limit (sometimes unacknowledged) to what the university can do or should be expected to do in terms of changing the distribution of knowledge in society.

As we saw in section 4, the basic good that the university distributes is not the socio-economic good of a particular job or social position (or the distribution of jobs and social positions), but *knowledge*. This sets clear limits on how the university can conduct its social justice mission.

Firstly, the university must organise itself to discover and teach knowledge—that is, justified, true belief. In the pursuit of social justice, it cannot teach what is false or what is not justified. Together with all other epistemic institutions, the university is bound by epistemic norms. Granted, such norms bind other institutions besides the university too (like scientific laboratories, the publishing industry or the media); however, these norms do not bind all institutions (for instance, political parties or trade unions are there to promote someone's interest, rather than discover and communicate truth objectively). This already sets a first (albeit loose) constraint on the university—any socio-economic role it fulfils must still be in keeping with communicating justified true beliefs.

Of course, it is a further question *which* justified true beliefs the university must communicate. An answer is available to this question too, and this brings us to the second constraint on the university's socio-economic role that follows from its role as distributor of knowledge. As I hold in Kotzee (2018), the epistemic role of all educational institutions is two-fold: to transmit knowledge that has already been discovered from one generation to the next (so that each generation need not discover all knowledge afresh), and to form the kinds of thinkers that can advance knowledge beyond what has already been discovered. This, too, makes demands on universities in terms of how it can carry on the distribution of knowledge. As custodians of important human knowledge, universities must (as Newman, Jaspers and Oakeshott realised) have an eye to how it selects, teaches and assesses its students for the maintenance of this knowledge. Moreover, in contrast with schools, universities in particular must have an eye to developing the kinds of intellectual who make new discoveries. Indeed, because the Humboldtian university blends functions of research and education, and because a university education is in part an apprenticeship in research, the university has a special task in developing the capacities of the most curious and innovative students (beyond the school's task in this regard). The second constraint on the university's socio-economic functioning is this: the university may fulfil a fantastic socio-economic function, but it must *first* ensure that the most important human knowledge and knowledge-gathering practices survive from generation to generation. Its socio-economic functioning cannot interfere with this more basic task.

Once it is settled that the university must distribute knowledge and what knowledge this amounts to, the last question that needs to be answered is who the university should distribute this knowledge to. Here, too, the university's epistemic orientation sets some constraints. As Martin and I argue (Kotzee & Martin, 2013, pp. 636–638), knowledge is not the kind of thing that can simply be

distributed—it is not something that anyone simply gives to someone else. After all, for someone to know something, that something must not only be true, but the knower needs to believe it and needs to have available evidence for it. We can say that knowledge is not only distributed by people, but needs to be grasped or received by others. Likewise with a substantive education: the person receiving a formal education must invest cognitive effort for that education to have a substantive effect or outcome. In this sense, an education is not like receiving some kind of good, but only having an opportunity to acquire a good for oneself; just like a gym membership does not automatically make one fit, but is only an opportunity for working out, so an education does not automatically make one knowledgeable, but is only an opportunity to become knowledgeable.

The distribution of a university education, then, is the distribution of the opportunity to gain knowledge and, as Martin and I hold, the opportunity to receive a university education is appropriate to some people—those who can make a success of it—and not to others who could not possibly make a success of it. To put it differently, the opportunity to go to university must be given to those who are prepared enough to learn. As Morrow makes clear, university admissions decisions are not simply about access to the university in the formal sense of being admitted as a student; they are about “epistemological access” to the substantive education that the student will receive there (2009, p. 78). This requirement of epistemic access sets a further constraint on the university in how it can achieve its socio-economic goals: the university must teach certain kinds of knowledge (outlined above) and it must then select students to teach who are sufficiently prepared to learn that knowledge. Otherwise, the university’s educational efforts will be wasted.³ Admittedly, the class of students who are capable of learning what the university teaches is broad—broader than the current university student population—and nothing says that students cannot be selected to attend university differently than at present. However, the epistemic requirement of epistemic access shapes the amount of leeway that the university has in fulfilling its socio-economic role.

The point of the foregoing is not that the university serves no social or economic role at all. It serves great social and economic roles, such as passing on useful knowledge from generation to generation, maintaining an infrastructure for making new discoveries, educating professionals in a wide variety of roles, even studying current society and debating and advancing ways to improve it. The university does not have distinct “socio-economic” and “epistemic” goals that it pursues in tandem and must trade off against one another. Rather, the university fulfils its socio-economic roles exactly by distributing knowledge to its students. However, because the distribution of knowledge is not the same as the distribution of purely social goods (like money, power, or position), the fact that it distributes knowledge sets distinct limits to how the university can promote its (further, derivative) socio-economic goods.

6. The University’s Role in Combatting Epistemic Injustice

Focussing on what universities *cannot* do differently in distributing knowledge (like we did in section 5) may make it seem as if a focus on knowledge as the good of the university is essentially part of a

³ And it would be no good to those who are taught something at university that they are not equipped, by previous study, to learn either.

conservative educational project—a project to protect the status quo in the distribution of knowledge. It is not the case that a focus on knowledge is an *apologia*. Indeed, in epistemology, justice issues are garnering new attention in the form of a focus on *epistemic justice*. In this last section, I will show that conceiving of the good of the university as knowledge naturally invites us to parse justice issues in the distribution of university education as epistemic justice.

At its most basic, “epistemic justice” (Fricker, 2007) is justice in how people regard and treat one another as knowers. As Coady (1992) and Lackey (2008) explain, much (even most!) of any person’s knowledge comes from testimony—from what other people tell them. In explaining what “testimonial” epistemic justice⁴ amounts to, Fricker (pp. 23–28) cites the case of the character Tom Robinson in Harper Lee’s novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. At Robinson’s trial for assaulting a white woman, the white jury does not believe Robinson’s (truthful) testimony that he is innocent, and as a result he is convicted. Fricker explains that Robinson has suffered a “credibility deficit” due to “systematic identity prejudice” on the side of the jury. Because the jury does not believe him, Robinson suffers the “primary” (*epistemic*) harm of being misrecognised as someone who can share knowledge. *Because* of this primary harm, he also suffers the further (secondary) harm of being deprived of his freedom and his life (Maitra, 2010, pp. 197–198; Kotzee, 2013). The example makes it very clear that epistemic harms are not only a deep insult but can have very real social consequences.

In education, epistemic justice and injustice are receiving increased attention too (Kotzee, 2017). In particular, both at the point of admission to university and at the point of graduation, a form of testimonial injustice like that just described is depressingly common. At the point of admission to university, it is frequently the case that some applicants are given unfair preference over others based on the (spurious) judgement that they will make better students. If a university were to (say) give preference to middle-class, male or majority-culture students over working-class, female or minority-culture students based on the spurious epistemic judgement that the former will make better students, this would be a testimonial injustice. Just like the jury do not believe Tom Robinson’s testimony because of prejudice about the reliability and accuracy of his testimony, one might say, so a university’s admissions staff would be guilty of testimonial injustice if they were to turn away well-qualified working-class, female or minority-culture students or tacitly set them higher hurdles for admission.

Moreover, testimonial injustice is all too widespread at the point of graduation and hiring. If employers were to give systematic preference (when it comes to desirable jobs) for applicants from particular universities over those from other universities, based not on real judgements about the substantive education that students had received at those universities, but based solely on the reputation of the university in question, this *too* would be a testimonial injustice. After all, the *mere* fact that someone attended an elite university does not mean that they are a more trustworthy or informative knower than someone who had attended a less prestigious university... *especially* when one considers that testimonial injustice often occurs in who is *selected* to attend elite universities in the first place. The problem is one of educational snobbery and an epistemic view on educational justice shows us why snobbery is unjust (Kotzee, 2013, p. 346).

As I have detailed in earlier work (Kotzee, 2013, 2017), the problem of testimonial injustice is remedied for Fricker through the inculcation (in individuals and also in society’s institutions) of the virtue of testimonial justice. This virtue demands that the proper credibility is assigned to people based

⁴ Next to testimonial injustice, Fricker identifies a second kind of epistemic injustice: hermeneutical injustice. I leave that aside here.

on what they know (or, one might add, are in a position to know), and not based on who they are. This cuts both ways—it implies both that one must properly recognise what epistemically under-valued people know or can do (it may be more than people commonly believe) and to recognise what epistemically over-valued people really know or can do (this may be less than people commonly believe). Importantly, however, the solution to testimonial epistemic injustice in the distribution of university education does not lie only in changing the admissions systems of elite universities, but also in the fostering of a general awareness throughout society of what are and are not legitimate epistemic standings that students may acquire through their university education. Inasmuch as having attended a (elite) university genuinely contributes to someone’s intellectual development, having attended that institution may enhance one’s epistemic credibility quite properly; however, inasmuch as having attended that institution merely adds to one’s social cachet, it does not. One thing that elite universities in particular can do is to combat the educational snobbery that they themselves have been party to in the past and that many universities probably continue to foster in order to accrue advantages for themselves. It is a task for the university itself to make clear what good its degrees are as a proxy in hiring decisions and to correct for it if people misuse its degrees as a mere status device. It is also a job for all universities to educate the public about matters like what the extra value of a university degree over another kind of qualification really is (it is not universally more valuable) and to have a proper and open discussion about how the value of elite universities’ qualifications really measure up against the value of those of non-elite universities.

I do not hold out much hope that universities will really take up this task. Universities are jealous of status and of the student fees and research funding that gravitate towards status. But we should criticise universities when they mislead the public about the true epistemic worth of their education and their graduates. Inflating graduates’ credibility and damaging the credibility of non-graduates (or graduates of lesser institutions) is a form of epistemic injustice of which some universities or the whole university sector is often guilty. In line with the suggestion above, the path to justice in the distribution of university education does not *only* go through changing whom the university admits to study there, but changing perceptions of the university and being more humble and realistic about the university as an institution and a university education as an education. It’s not just that the good of the university needs to be distributed more fairly. We need to be clearer about what that good is and how valuable it really is. One might say that, beyond distributing (elite) university education more fairly, another justice task for universities is to probe and question notions of eliteness and to make clear to the public what they are really good for (and what not).

7. Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have investigated the question of whether the good that the university offers is political or epistemic. I have held that philosophers who write about higher education need to recall an older tradition of thinking about the good of the university: that the university is fundamentally there for the promotion of science and scholarship, rather than for direct political ends. However, departing from the traditional view (that we get from Newman, Jaspers and Oakeshott), I have held that, rather than an institution apart from society, reconceiving the epistemic role of the university clarifies what its social role really is and can be. I have held that the university can take many steps to make more worthwhile

epistemic contributions to society. The university can focus on conducting research that is genuinely worthwhile and important to people's lives. It can disseminate the results of this research more fairly. And it can do more to help the public at large understand this research. Moreover, the university can work harder to promote epistemic justice in society. The university can admit students based on genuine potential, rather than on social position. It can also cultivate intellectual confidence in those students who need more confidence and intellectual humility in those who have too much confidence already. Lastly, it can educate the public to better estimate the true epistemic standing of graduates and non-graduates in society. The main point is that the university should do all of these things for *epistemic* reasons, not political ones, and the extent to which the university changes how it works in this regard is shaped by the university's overall task of discovering and communicating knowledge. If the university influences politics, it should properly do so through the pursuit of knowledge and quality epistemic cooperation rather than through the mere re-engineering of social standing.

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