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The coming of the ecological university

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What is it to be a university? In what does the being of the university reside in the 21st century? To draw on a Heideggerian expression, what is its ‘being possible’? To address such questions seriously, we are drawn to imagine the university as it might unfold and so sketch out feasible utopias for it. But such a project of the imagination requires in the first place a sense as to the past and present trajectory of the university. The dominant ideas—and forms—of the university have to be identified. A further step taken here is that of furnishing conceptual resources that may help us imagine the university into the future. Four imaginaries of the university are then sketched, with allegiance being given especially to the coming of the ecological university.

**Keywords:** university; imagination; imaginary; utopias; ecology

**Introduction**

Just what is it to be a university? Could a rational society be imagined without a university? Universities have been with us on this Earth for at least one thousand years and will surely be with us in the future; perhaps so long as there is life on this planet that has any well-being. There is now something in not just the name of the institution but in the idea of the university that seems to have durability. But yet, the question imposes itself again: just what is it to be a university?

The question has seldom been asked seriously. There is good reason for this state of affairs for, in the past and up to the present age, the university was largely given. This is not to say that there is a single set of ideas that constitute an ‘essence’ of the university over time. Quite to the contrary and crucial to the thesis for which I shall contend here. The university has unfolded in such a way as to take a successive number of characteristic forms associated with certain clusters of...
ideas as to what it is to be a university. That unfolding has two features that are central to our story here: first, there has been a certain inevitability to the university’s unfolding hitherto; and secondly, there are now options in front of the university. That ‘there is no alternative’ to the form now being taken by the university is precisely not the case: now, there are lots of alternatives.

It follows that what it is to be a university today has optionality written into it. And this is a dual optionality—in form and in idea. To draw on a Heideggerian phrasing, the university has ‘being possible’ (Heidegger, 1998/1962, p. 145): its being is replete with possibilities. And with possibilities comes also responsibility. That the university today has responsibilities facing it was observed by Derrida (2004) who, indeed, pressed the question: what is the responsibility of the university today? That Derrida’s answer to his own question could be felt to be somewhat lacking in substance was perhaps understandable given his ‘deconstructionalist’ philosophy. It just may be, however, that we can at least begin to fill out more fully an answer to that question, as to the responsibility of the university. But we can seriously address the matter of responsibility only provided we can give some specification of the possibilities in front of the university, as it unfolds in the 21st century.

It is no less than a sketch of some of those possibilities that I want to offer in this paper. I want to go further than that, however, and nail my own colours to the mast of one of those conceptions of the university. Before I go on, however, I want briefly to pause to make some brief observations on the character of this inquiry.

As I see it, the task ahead is to develop feasible utopias. That is to say, it is to develop ideas not as to how the university might be in the best of all possible worlds but rather how it might be its best in this world. Such ideas would be utopian in that they would be unlikely to be realised given the empirical character of the world, with its power structures, interests and ideologies. On the other hand, such ideas would also be feasible in that we can identify instances of those ideas being instantiated to a certain extent—at least, embryonically—in the world even now. To draw on a phrase from Deleuze, such utopias would form a kind of ‘transcendental empiricism’ (Colebrook, 2005), rooted in the empirical world but yet imaginatively having an independence from it. We can provide evidence of such utopias being realised today.

This is a social philosophy with a critical edge. Feasible utopias are at least implicitly, and maybe also explicitly, critical of the contemporary situation. In relation to the topic at hand, far from assuming that there is no alternative to the contemporary being of the university, this social philosophy opens a space to allow for many alternatives. Part of the task, here, therefore, is to sketch out a range of alternative conceptions of the university, each of which is implicitly critical of the present situation in which the university is characteristically placed. Here, I shall want to go further even than that for I shall want to contend for what I term ‘the ecological university’. This university is, I shall argue, the best kind of university that we can hope for under contemporary conditions; and it is one that still does justice to the idea of the university itself.
The metaphysical university

In its earliest incarnation, we witnessed the metaphysical university. As with all forms of the university, the metaphysical university was associated not with a single idea but with a constellation of ideas, even if those ideas contained internal instabilities (cf. Bernstein, 1991). The dominant idea behind the metaphysical university was that this was an institution that, through the learning and inquiry that it sponsored, gave access to a transcendent realm. This overarching idea took a variety of more specific forms. Here, learning made possible insight into the world as God’s creation; and so into God Himself. Through learning, one came into a new relationship with God. Here, too, learning was also felt to open the way alternatively to Spirit, to Truth and to a world of Enlightenment. A yet further manifestation of the transcendent realm was even that of the State, for higher learning was also understood to draw one into a personal relationship with the State.

We are entitled to see this set of ideas as constituting ‘the metaphysical university’ since this university understood itself as opening the way for human being to enter a new form of being, apart from the mundane world. (The University of Aberdeen was founded in the late middle ages to offer ‘personal salvation’ to its students.) This was a sacred kind of learning, and with it came a hinterland of concepts such as ‘mystery’, ‘wonder’ and ‘wisdom’. There was an ineffability about the learning associated with this University. The curriculum, through the quadrivium and the trivium, certainly offered forms of knowing rooted in this world but they were fundamentally forms of knowing that opened a new and transcendent set of experiences. This conception of the university lasted for several hundred years, prompting Cardinal John Henry Newman (1976 edn) to talk of its providing ‘a philosophical habit of mind’ (p. 57) and requiring students to ‘ascend’ (p. 125): the ascent was precisely an educational voyage that enabled individuals to move into a new and a higher world, and so into a separate state of human being. The metaphysical university was a university-for-the-beyond. It looked beyond the immediacy of (this) mundane life for its being.

There were both epistemological and ontological dimensions of this metaphysical university. Epistemologically, there was here a sense of there being a unity to knowledge. Knowledge was not exactly indivisible but yet all of its component parts were interlinked. There was a single world of knowledge even if it could be studied in different ways. Ontologically, the very process of knowing—of coming to know—not only brought changes in being, in what it was to be in the world, but also brought beneficial changes in being. Knowing was personally edifying. There was here, in this conception of the university, a tight and positive connection between knowing and being.

This university was associated with a particularly stratified society, in which a small caste of clerks, often with close ties to an established church, were endowed with semi-magical powers (cf. Gellner, 1988). In societies with limited levels of literacy, the clerks had something that was rare and mysterious. Through their learning, they could offer enlightenment to those who otherwise would remain
unenlightened. They stood in a different universe, cognitively and socially. They represented ways of being in the world, a being for enlightenment no less, ordinarily denied to most others. So the metaphysical idea was one that both held out the promise of universal salvation and yet was available only to a select minority.

The research university

The metaphysical university gave way to the research university. For this university, knowledge was everything. This, as the American sociologist, Robert Nisbet, put it (1971), was its ‘dogma’. The contrasts with the metaphysical university were stark. From scholarship and learning to knowledge and research. Knowledge became organised into disciplines and instead of knowledge being seen as forming a unity, it was now understood to be sharply differentiated, each discipline with its own properties and perspectives. This was a form of knowledge that was shorn both of its transcendental properties and of its personally edifying properties. This knowledge opened up new cognitive worlds: if there was mystery here, it lay internally in the procedures and the concepts that ‘research’ opened up in themselves and not in any divine experience opened up in the process.

In its earliest incarnations, knowledge in the research university quickly divided science, humanities and professional studies, but it was science that attracted the highest marks. Indeed, the research university could well be termed ‘the scientific university’; and often was. As a result, in this privileging of science, the humanities were marginalised, so leading periodically to angst on the part of the humanities with books appearing periodically bearing the title ‘The Crisis in the Humanities’ or some derivation of it.

In the research university, research is more significant than teaching. Very recently, that significance has taken a financial edge as research has attracted much greater discretionary income. But the research university, as the appellation implies, has ‘research’ in its being. The core of its being lies in research. It understands itself as a ‘research university’ or at least as a ‘research intensive university’ (for even the research university understands that it has to engage in activities other than research). It was this focus on research-in-itself that gave rise to such popular epithets as ‘ivory tower’, ‘knowledge for its own sake’ and (even) ‘academic freedom’. This was a university that was accorded freedoms from society in order to conduct research. Decision-making powers were vested in the University Senate as the supreme representative body of the academic community; the role of the University Council was—both de jure and de facto—limited (Moodie & Eustace, 1973).

We can surely explain the freedoms that were accorded the research university through the power and control that research was assumed to bring. Power and control was, as Jurgen Habermas indicated (1978), a ‘knowledge-constitutive interest’. This power and control operated, we can say, on two levels. It lay in the scientific method which hinged on the possibility of isolating and controlling conditions affecting natural phenomena so as to make possible powerful predictions of those same phenomena in their natural state. But power and control also
lay in more general political and state interests in science. This powerful science just might yield the possibility of exercising control over the physical environment. That the research university was given special impetus as a state funded institution during two world wars is not happenstance.

In its later manifestation, this research university gained added significance with the emergence of the so-called ‘knowledge society’ (Stehr, 1994, pp. 80–82) and then ‘the knowledge economy’ (Peters, Marginson, & Murphy, 2009). Such a university, the fulcrum of which lay in systematic knowledge, was rapidly called into service. States understood that in order to maintain and, if possible, improve their positioning in a world dependent on formal knowledge (or so it seemed), research universities were a necessary condition of their economic flourishing. Correspondingly, universities gradually understood that, in the knowledge society, knowledge production was widely distributed and that they now had competitors in knowledge production beyond themselves; and so their knowledge production efforts had to be redoubled.

The research university was a ‘university-in-itself’. It was concerned with its own knowledge production activities. It was an era in which researchers could, without embarrassment, declare their disinterest in any applications of their findings (even as others were discerning the technological possibilities of that research). This university was in-itself, its academics intent on publication in the journals irrespective of the numbers of readers of those journals. It prided itself on its separateness from society. Its being lay in a space that it declared its own. Academic identities were academic identities, produced in and sustained by the academy. The research university proclaimed a belief—even if it did not believe in its proclamation—in the uselessness of knowledge.

The entrepreneurial university

The research university—as a dominant idea—gave way to the entrepreneurial university. If the research university is a university in-itself, the entrepreneurial university is a university for-itself. This is a university that has its being amid the marketisation of what were public services. This university is told by the state that what counts in knowledge production is ‘impact’ but it has no need of such guidance, since impact is precisely what the entrepreneurial university understands. The entrepreneurial university is a ‘performative university’; and doubly so. It understands that it has to perform in the world to survive; or at least it considers that to be the case. It has to be active in the world; an engaged university indeed. And it understands further that its knowledge products and services have to perform in the world, preferably marked by an economic return. In this milieu, knowledge is valued in terms of its exchange value before its use value.

This university might be judged to be the outcome of ‘neo-liberalism’, a globalised Weltanschauung of an opening of public services in general to market disciplines. But this view of the university as having been caught by large forces acting upon it would be a tendentious reading, for the entrepreneurial university has been
complicit in its own emergence. ‘Academic capitalism’ does not just befall universities but is, to a large degree, embraced by them. (We may note, in passing, that the phrase ‘academic capitalism’ has been made recently popular by Sheila Slaughter and Larry Leslie (1997) but it was in fact used by Robert Nisbet (1971) who had long since seen in the emergence of academic capitalism the ‘degradation’ of the academic dogma, namely knowledge as such.)

Accordingly, the entrepreneurial university understands itself as changing. In this respect, this is a new form of university being. Whereas previously, in the research university, it was understood that its knowledge findings and claims changed, now the entrepreneurial university understands itself as changing also. This, after all, is partly why the metaphor of the entrepreneurial university is so potent, for the entrepreneur seeks to change his business, so as to move it from point A to point B. The movement carries risk, and it is no coincidence that in the UK—one of the most marketised systems of higher education—universities now regularly conduct risk assessments of their activities.

This is a university that has turned itself inside-out. Qua research university, it was concerned with knowledge as such and especially its own knowledge efforts. This university looked inwards, not so much at itself but to its own knowledge interests. Now, qua entrepreneurial university, it is concerned with the impact of its knowledge efforts on the world. Markers of that impact are sought; preferably money (as stated) but other indicators of impact come into the reckoning (such as national and international prizes and citation indices). Social and cultural capital rivals, but does not supplant, economic capital. In marketing its knowledge services and products, new knowledge activities arise, and with it a new vocabulary (of ‘third stream’ activities; consultancy; patenting; and knowledge transfer). Internal offices may be set up intent on extracting as much revenue as possible from the university’s knowledges. Opportunities for knowledge services are identified, much to the surprise of some academics; and this endeavour reaches widely across knowledge domains, even into the humanities. Academics themselves take on entrepreneurial identities.

In this milieu, the form of knowledge production itself begins to change. If the research university was characterised by Mode 1 knowledge—formal, propositional, disciplinary, universal and public—now the entrepreneurial university is characterised by Mode 2 knowledge—in-situ, ephemeral, multidisciplinary (and even transdisciplinary), and problem-oriented. Certainly, it was part of the thesis of Michael Gibbons and his colleague authors (1994) that Mode 2 knowledge has grown up outside the academy. But it is part of the being of the entrepreneurial university both that it seizes the main chance and engages with its potential customers; and so it is drawn naturally into the knowledge world of Mode 2.

A further characteristic of the entrepreneurial university is that it is competitive. This is but a necessary concomitant of the market situation in which the entrepreneurial university has its being. And the entrepreneurial university thrives in this situation, loudly proclaiming how little it is now dependent on the state for support. There is much hand-wringing over the various league tables—national and
international—but the entrepreneurial university lives happily with such public reckonings of its relative success. For the league tables are a rather benign form of the competitiveness with which it lives daily. In this situation, therefore, universities compete against each other for contracts, for clients and customers, and for public visibility and external confirmation. The collective academic community fades.

**Interlude**

At this point, it may be helpful to make some observations about the argument I am trying to develop.

First, the story so far has not been empirical as such but it has had empirical elements. I have been suggesting that there is a temporal unfolding to the university both in its dominant ideas and its forms. The university has both being and time; and its being is in time.

At any one time, we understand the university’s being in part through a set of ideas. These ideas constitute, to draw on a recent term of Charles Taylor (2007), the ‘social imaginaries’ of the university. They supply the dominant background understandings by which the university understands itself and is expected to understand itself. In turn, these ideas flow from, to draw on a much earlier (1969) phrase of Taylor’s, the dominant ‘value background’ that plays upon the university. The value background is characteristically built upon large ideas that provide horizons of significance. Such horizons of significance may be dominant themes or ideas—about God or knowledge or performance in the world.

The value background attending the university changes over time; and, with its changing, so too changes the social imaginaries of the university. The social imaginaries are social in that they work upon the social situation of the university, in its relationship to social institutions and the wider society and individuals as members of society. The social imaginaries are imaginary in that they orient the university in certain directions; they suggest directions for the university’s forward travel. They provide a sense of its future possibilities. To invoke the idea of ‘the entrepreneurial university’ is not merely to describe the university at a point in time but it is also to indicate its possibilities, the possibilities for its unfolding. Even to invoke the idea of ‘the metaphysical university’ is to open speculation as to the university’s possibilities, for we can ask of the university today ‘In what way and to what degree might it make sense to understand it as a metaphysical university?'

The general task in front of us is that of imagining the university: what ideas and forms of the university are possible and desirable in the 21st century? There is no reason to believe that the emergence of the entrepreneurial university marks a kind of resting point in the unfolding of the university. Certainly, there are empirical limits to the possibilities for the university but, logically, there is an infinite space in which our imaginations might work. An infinite number of conceptions are possible even within a bounded space.

Herein lies the task of which I spoke at the outset, that of identifying feasible utopias, namely, ideas of the university that are unlikely to be realised but which,
in the best of this world, just might be realised. For such utopias, there would be a possibility both that the general conditions of the imagined universities could be realised and that, already, there would glimpses in some places of such institutional forms. The task is that of working out a social hope for the university through the imagination but tempering that hope with an appraisal and a perception of real possibilities (cf. Halpin, 2003).

This places responsibilities and even some limitations on the exercise of the imagination; but it remains infinite in its possibilities. It has to have an eye on the empirical conditions of the age; but it also has to have an eye on the conceptual landscape. By ‘conceptual landscape’, I mean the kinds of concepts that might enable us to make progress in this inquiry. A fruitful tack might lie in putting together pairs of concepts and then working through their interconnections insofar as they bear on the university. For example, ‘space and time’; ‘culture and anarchy’; ‘authenticity and responsibility’ and ‘being and becoming’. Such conceptual juxtapositions open up conceptual spaces in which new forms of the university might be imagined. They also would help to pose questions of any new ideas of the university.

We may take just one of these pairs of concepts by way of example. In relation to ‘space and time’, we can inquire into the spaces available to the university and the horizons of time attendant on the university. And we can inquire into the interrelationships between space and time. For instance, as the university moves more into global space, are the horizons of time shortening or lengthening? Perhaps both phenomena are evident. The university lives amid multiple time frames and in multiple spaces. All at one, it lives amid fast time and durable time; and it lives amid local and global spaces. Perhaps in different institutions, and in different disciplines, some spaces and timeframes are dominant; the local gives way to the global; the long-term gives way to the short-term. That would be a matter for empirical inquiry. The point is that the conceptual inquiry opens up possibilities for empirical inquiry, which in turn would be likely to prompt new conceptual challenges. The conceptual and the empirical would interweave in the working out of new ideas for the university. Imagining the university is a liberating practice but it also comes with its responsibilities and, thereby, its constraints.

**Being-possible: ideas of the university’s becoming**

What kinds of ‘being-possible’ (to draw again on Heidegger’s term) are in front of the university that might warrant our attention? I offer four as exemplars. In this section, I explore three of them to indicate their own possibilities and their limitations.

*The liquid university*

*The liquid university* is fluid (cf. Bauman, 2000). It moves intentionally—or to a significant extent—but lacks direction as such. It has a centre of sorts but still its
parts move of their own volition in response to the world that they encounter. It is
not, however, necessarily without guiding principles. To the contrary, its different
parts may have their own guiding principles; it is beset by competing value sys-
tems. Accordingly, there is no one source of momentum for this university but
multiple sources. Perhaps, for each university, there is a dominant set of values
and sources of momentum. Science, research, knowledge transfer, public mission,
impact, income generation, widening participation: each and any of these serve as
goals that draw the university—or, at least, different parts of it—forward. To draw
on Schopenhauer’s (1997) term, each university has its own will and may even
share in a collective will to be a university; so that will is both a complex and is
differentially formed.

Deleuze and Guattari (2004) see human becoming as in the form of a rhizome,
with its bulbous and tubular forms going in many directions, apparently with
rather little shape or teleology. Perhaps more tellingly we should understand the
liquid university as a kind of squid, moving this way and that, able to transport
itself with extraordinary ease, power and rapidity. The liquid university is a
manoeuvrable university.

Are the waters in which it moves ethically pure or muddy or even a little pol-
luted? A challenge for the liquid university is precisely that of its ethical base. A
neat gambit attracts here: the university, to warrant its name, is a space in which
dialogue and even disagreement as to values are sustained. The university reflects
both the Habermassian ‘ideal speech situation’ and the Lyotardian disinclination
to opt for large narratives; and the liquid university squares this circle explicitly. It
encourages and exemplifies ‘dissensus’ (Readings, 1997). But this is too easy a
get-out, even for the liquid university. For it leads not just to value ambiguity but
value incoherence. On the one hand, it lives in the world of private finance and
knowledge exploitation; on the other hand, it lives in the world of public benefit
and knowledge circulation. At least, the liquid university is aware of its own ten-
dencies towards incoherence and tries to work out a modus vivendi for living amid
such ethical mayhem.

The therapeutic university

The liquid university, then, is without a value position (other than ‘let a thousand
values bloom’) and shrinks from declaring its values. If not logic, at least it has
contemporary social theory on its side. For the contemporary world we are told is
not just a liquid world but also a ‘risk society’ (Beck, 1992). The two features are
intertwined. The uncertainty that produces its fluidity also generates risk. Risk is
the propensity of situations and phenomena to bring in their wake unwelcome
events. As such, risk has always been part of the human condition; an inevitable
presence of the likelihood of unwelcome events. But now those unwelcome events
multiply as a result of human interventions in the world. They multiply even expon-
entially due to human interventions themselves co-mingling and so having com-
bined outcomes that cannot even be computed, their interactions are so complex.
Two possibilities are available to the university in this milieu. On the one hand, it seeks if not to avoid risk to itself, then to minimise it. And so universities—across the UK at least—are developing elaborate systems to assess risk and to enable themselves to conduct a ‘risk audit’ of virtually every act that might have consequences of risk. This is—as we noted—particularly significant in the context of the emergence of the ‘entrepreneurial university’ for entrepreneurial activity is, by definition, activity to which risk is attached. It has come naturally to universities to develop such systems for risk analysis since they have also become highly regulated internally (as well as externally). It is not an exaggeration to say that we have seen the rise of the *bureaucratic university*, replete with its expanding systems of regulation, surveillance and evaluation. The developing of risk audits is a natural extension of such moves. In developing risk assessment procedures, the bureaucratic university hopes to bring under control that which precisely cannot be controlled.

On the other hand, a quite different set of responses is available to the university in a world of uncertainty. This is the stance of helping the world to live purposively with uncertainty. Here, we see the potential rise of the *therapeutic university*. The therapeutic university understands both that the world cannot be fully controlled and that the idea of ‘control’ is anathema to the core values of an institution claiming the title of ‘university’. Instead, to draw on another Heideggerian term, it has a ‘care’ for, a concern, for human being in a tempestuous world. Its pedagogical function becomes less one of knowing about the world and more one of bringing forth being that is capable of living positively and effectively in a world of incessant challenge. Its pedagogical function becomes less epistemological and more ontological in character; and today books and conferences are happily positioned as contributing to an ‘ontological turn’ (including Barnett (2007)).

Such an orientation plays out in different ways, according to whether a strong sense of the therapeutic university was being realised or a weaker sense. The weaker sense plays itself out in a concern with the university as an environment for human flourishing. Such a concern connects with the emergence of a wider interest in ‘well-being’. It is to be seen in the manifold policies that universities are developing in relation to equal participation and human rights on campus (of non-harassment and so forth). Efforts will be made in helping, for example, ethnic minorities to feel that their own well-being is of concern on campus. Counselling services develop, for both students and staff. The stronger sense plays itself out in interventions in the curriculum, such that the curriculum becomes a space for working through personal anxieties. Whereas formerly, there was a boundary between the curriculum and the personal, now the personal dimension of learning is permitted into the curriculum space. Ethical dilemmas raised by curricula issues are brought explicitly into the curriculum and worked through. Differences of view among students are exposed and engaged. The curriculum becomes a space for cooling personal anxiety.

This development, the emergence of the therapeutic university, contains both pernicious and benign possibilities. In its pernicious form, failure is barely
permitted. As such, students may come to expect not just that they will gain a degree but that they will gain a ‘good degree’, so contributing to an ‘inflation’ of such classes of degree (in the UK, at least). In its more benign form, students are encouraged to develop the personal dispositions that enable them to flourish even amid the challenge of the disciplinary standards that accompany their higher education.

For some, admittedly, the idea of the therapeutic university is regrettable. In the hands of these critics, the term ‘the therapeutic university’ is a term of near-abuse (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009). It is intended to indicate that this idea and form of the university is a falling short of its true destiny. This is a university that ‘infantilises’ students (p. 87) in which its over-concern with students’ well-being neglects its primary functions connected with the critical appropriation of knowledge. For these critics, students who graduate from the therapeutic university, having had their wants met, are likely to be ‘passive’ citizens, unable to discern sound knowledge and to exercise their critical judgement.

The critics of the therapeutic university have some point on their side but their arguments are putting up straw men. No institution worth the name of ‘university’ can content itself purely with a concern for well-being—whether of its employees or its students—but who is arguing for such a position? To the contrary, the claim on behalf of the therapeutic university is that the effort to come seriously to know exerts demands on the self and those demands have increased as knowledge has become evermore global and subject to the public interest. Knowing calls forth the self. Even Popper’s (1975) idea of objective knowledge, in addition to entities in the world (World I) and knowledge about those entities (World III), allowed as World II, the mind. A concern with the knowing self, therefore, is arguably an entirely proper pedagogical concern, if only in fulfilment of the university’s concern with knowledge.

The authentic university

If the therapeutic university is running the risk of betraying its true identity, the authentic university tackles the matter head-on. This is a university that is intent (Polonius-like) on being to its own self true, but it understands that that simple self-injunction is fraught with difficulty. What is it, what might it be, for a university to be true to itself? Every university in the world is subject to the pushes and pulls of its environment. Those pushes and pulls come in the shape of expectations, resources and regulation. Some are unwanted and some are given grudging attention; yet others may even be induced by a university itself, albeit for hoped-for advancement of some kind. This state of affairs may be summarised as the coming of the networked university. The habitus of the contemporary university is spaghetti-like in its complexity. So the idea of a university being true to itself under these circumstances is looking to be something of a chimera.

There are two problems for the authentic university. The first is that already implied, of trying to sort out what a disencumbered position (cf. Cooper, 2002)
might look like, such that it can offer the prospects of authenticity. The second is that of working out what, in even more general terms, ‘authenticity’ might mean for a university. Would it mean to identify and to hold onto some kind of universal position open to all institutions that warrant the title of ‘university’? (This is not, we should note, to ask about an unchanging essence of the university for it might be that a new universal idea of the university is opening up or could feasibly open up in the 21st century.) Or, to the contrary, would it mean identifying a position that is particular to each university? After all, this is presumably part of the rationale for universities producing their own so-called ‘mission statements’. Perhaps authenticity is to be found not in any locale that a university might attain for itself but is rather to be found in its having a set of values that can help to give it some kind of steer. Compromises with its values there may well have to be but at least the university can content itself that it has a worked-out set of values (and many mission statements these days do contain just such a statement of a university’s own values).

Perhaps, to pick up a term of Stephen Rowland (2006), the authentic university is an enquiring university. Unless we were in the presence of enquiry, we could not be in the presence of a ‘university’. The enquiring university is true to its own self in that it takes seriously its penchant for enquiry. It holds onto its self-image as a place of enquiry, an image almost lost from view but now possibly recovered. The enquiring university looks to build an internal community of enquirers, across the disciplines that it represents; and this community would include both academics and students. Students would be encouraged to see themselves as enquirers and so dent the tendency towards their self-understandings as consumers.

But the recovery of the idea of enquiry brings a discovery too, namely an understanding of the possibilities for this university in the 21st century. The medi-
aeval university was a cross-national place of enquiry. Now, the responsibility falls upon the enquiring university to interpret its calling globally. And this responsibility is aided by modern technology: through the use of the internet, the university can place its knowledge wares before global publics. Its academics will understand themselves in part as public intellectuals, with a responsibility to engage with publics. Such a university would not merely be offering the world new descriptions of the world or even critiques but new understandings; even new ‘imaginaries’ (Taylor, 2007).

‘Enquiry’ stands, therefore, as a possible exemplification of the authentic university in that it goes some way to fulfilling the criteria of authenticity here. The theme of enquiry looks back to the origins and traditions of the university but it does not languish there for the theme is brought up to date, in a search for its contemporary possibilities. Criteria of past resonance and contemporary relevance are both satisfied, therefore. But the enquiring university—in realising its authenticity—also takes seriously the matter of the universalism implicit in the idea of ‘university’. The enquiring university seeks to promote enquiry on a global scale and does so conscious of the challenges that such a responsibility attracts (for example, over copyright, in the light of the ‘new technologies of openness’
The coming of the ecological university

There are two questions in front of us and they have tensions between them. On the one hand lies the question with which we have just been grappling: ‘What might it mean for the idea of the authentic university really to have substance today?’ On the other hand lies the question (with which, as we saw, Derrida grappled): ‘Can we and if so in what way might we speak today of the responsibility of the university?’ The first question has its contemporary point against a suspicion that it is no longer possible for us meaningfully to talk of the university and authenticity in the same breath. The university has, it can reasonably be claimed at least, been undermined both philosophically—the large projects and ideas (such as universalism) on which the university depended are no longer available—and sociologically, as its autonomies evaporate and it is called upon to heed the expectations of its societal ‘stakeholders’. The second question gains its point also from a sense that the contemporary university simply falls in with the claims of its ‘stakeholders’. Having a sense of its own responsibility is mere sophistry.

These two questions, then, overlap in their underlying critiques of the modern university for they both suggest that it is no longer possible for the university to be what it should be. However, they may seem to point in different directions. The idea of authenticity implies here a sense of the university’s true self; the idea of authenticity has an inward quality. The idea of responsibility, on the other hand, points outwards. It implies that there is an outer realm of which the university should take note—whether of values, of service or of engagement. So there is an apparent tension here between authenticity and responsibility, between the inner and the outer callings of the university.

Perhaps this circle can be squared; perhaps the university—as it unfolds into the 21st century—can be both authentic and responsible. These two dimensions, of authenticity and responsibility, may be seen in what we may term the ecological university. This is a university that takes seriously both the world’s interconnectedness and the university’s interconnectedness with the world.

Fragments of such university becoming may already be seen. There is increasing attention being given to the idea of students as global citizens. As global citizens, students come to have a care or concern for the world and to understand their own possibilities in the world and towards the world. A concern for the world and an awareness of its interconnectedness is also evident in the newly established Talloires network, a worldwide group of major universities signed up (literally) to a mission of service to the world and ‘civic engagement’. Other universities, not formally connected with this group, are reflecting on their purposes and are wanting to develop an articulated sense of their potential contribution to the world. Some universities in the developed world are deliberately working with universities in the developing world, so extending the ‘capability’ to which Amartya Sen has
been pointing. In higher education research and scholarship, a distinct line of inquiry has been developing around the ‘public goods’ that a university may represent (e.g. Nixon, 2011). The University of Galway in Ireland has a research and development Centre for Civic Engagement. A particular offshoot of this work is the interest being shown in the development of the ‘creative commons’ (Peters, 2009) and the part that universities might play here, for example, in making their creative output freely available on the web.

A shorthand encapsulation of these developments might seem to lie in the term ‘the networked university’ for these universities are taking their networking very seriously (cf. Standaert, 2009). Indeed, universities are intent on developing new networks, between themselves and the wider society and, through those networks, are making available their knowledge resources. ‘The ecological university’, however, is surely a more powerful term of art here. For the notion of ecology today is fact and value intertwined. It is, in Bernard Williams’ (2006) terminology, a ‘thick concept’. It embodies hopes and critique towards a more sustainable future built around interconnectedness as well as a critique of the world order that has led to the contemporary world order. The ecological university does not merely take its networking seriously but engages actively with the world in order to bring about a better world.

The ecological university is perhaps just able to claim that it is providing a resolution of the tension between authenticity and responsibility. It hangs onto and, indeed, widens its traditional concern with the advancement of learning in wanting to permeate society with enhanced enlightenment and understanding; and so it is authentic to its inner calling. And in so taking forward and giving life to ‘the learning society’, the ecological university acknowledges and discovers, all at once, a responsibility to society. As the ecological university, it does all this by forming and widening its networks across society, a task which – unlike the entrepreneurial university – it performs not in its own interests but in the interests of the world; indeed, worlds, for it acts in the interests of both the human and physical worlds.

This is a university neither in-itself (the research university) nor for-itself (the entrepreneurial university) but for-others. Or, we might even say simply, for-the-other, for the ecological university has an abiding sense of alterity (cf. Standish, 2007), of there being external realms to which it has responsibilities, even while holding fast to its traditional interest in the emancipatory power of understanding for enlightenment.

This is a university not whose time is coming but whose time has come. The ecological university cannot be a sufficient condition of the world facing up to its challenges but it is a necessary condition. The huge catalogue of challenges facing the world—of disease, illiteracy and unduly limited education, climate change, dire poverty, lack of capability and basic resource, misunderstandings across communities, excessive use of the earth’s resources, energy depletion and so on and so on—requires the coming of the ecological university. This ecological university will be an engaged university, a critical and an enquiring university and a university-for-development, acting to put its resources to good effect in promoting world well-being. It will be active on the local and regional stages and, very often, on the
world stage. The ecological university, accordingly, will live out its (new) calling, but in ways that redeem its possibilities for enlightenment and well-being.

**Conclusion**

Our contemporary thinking about the university is hopelessly impoverished. The university is a creation of a metaphysical viewpoint, an attempt to provide a site of higher learning that connected with universal and transcendent ideas of the relationship between humankind and the universe. That the university has survived for a thousand years or more is testimony to its capacities for self-renewal. Ideas and their associated forms of the university have succeeded each other over time. Over the last 150 years, the research university has blossomed and is now being superceded by the entrepreneurial university. In the process, the university has become focused on the here-and-now, on impact in this immediate world; the universal and infinite have given way to the finite and the parochial. Certainly, the forms of the university do not give way so easily as the ideas: a modern university is, at any one time, a layering of forms, as the new settle, uneasily at times, over the earlier incarnations.

These simple reflections lead to some large considerations and aporias. Just what is it to be a university? What is the university’s ‘being possible’? For now, it is apparent that there are options in front of the university. The coming of the entrepreneurial university does not or, at least, should not represent the end-game. The university may be hedged by state policies, ideologies, limitations on resources and ‘stakeholder’ expectations but yet it has space available to become itself. Its own becoming lies in its own hands to some extent. This, then, is our first conclusion: that there are conceptual and practical options in front of the university. But then comes the second point: that the university now has a responsibility not simply to do this or become that but to choose its own becoming, whatever that may be felt to be. This is the key responsibility, that of choosing its own idea(s) of itself; and it may seem a fearful responsibility.

The optionality before the university does not include a ratcheting back. There can be no return to the research university in its pure form, still less to the metaphysical university. But the layerings of previous sedimentations remain, to offer conceptual and practical resources for renewal. In this postmetaphysical age, even remnants of the metaphysical stubbornly remain. Given its history, and the archaeology of its conceptual journey, and the challenges of the landscape now facing the university, its options are shaped to some extent, while also being open. Its options are open partly because its value horizons are open. The university, as it reshapes itself, has to choose its values: by which values will it be steered, as the rocks appear and the gales assail it?

The metaphysical university stood apart from society. Now, the modern university interpenetrates society, as society interpenetrates the university. The university is called upon to develop a societal mission, even a global mission. Very well; let it take that calling seriously and become a fully-fledged ecological university, aware of its interconnectedness with society and putting its resources towards the
development of societal and personal well-being. This would neither be merely a therapeutic university nor a liquid university but a university that worked actively and tirelessly in helping to bring about a sustainable world; and here, sustainability would be understood generously to include personal and social well-being as much as physical and material well-being. Whether this idea of the ecological university can come to overtake the entrepreneurial university and so furnish the university’s becoming in the 21st century is unclear. What is surely clear is that the university has to accept its own responsibility to think seriously about the matter: just what is it to be a university in the 21st century?

Notes on contributor

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