

What the Council for the Defence of British Universities could learn from William James and Jacques Derrida on the *raison d'être* of the University

Thirty years ago Jacques Derrida reinvigorated the debate on the *raison d'être* of the University proposing that it has an *unconditional* freedom to question and assert all that is required concerning the truth. Derrida's subtle analysis grounds the University's rationale as the home for theoretic and performative reason and identifies the threats to its existence from external interests. The argument of this paper is that we need adapt some of the ideas of William James for a change of focus from the idea of the university being a place for the logical or rational development of ideas to the university being the place for people to acquire, develop, and transmit ideas and knowledge. We need to think less of the idea of the university and more of the people who acquire their ideas at, in, from or through the Universities. When the University "professes the truth – for that is its profession", we need to understand its audience(s) – the students, other academics inside and outside the discipline or, more generally, society as a whole and particularly those who need specific knowledge to solve problems.

This paper examines 6 connected areas linking the thoughts of Derrida and James on the *raison d'être* of the University in an effort to reapply key elements of Jamesian thought to our own times.

i) The nature of theoretical reasoning: both James and Derrida accept that if we consider reason as being at the heart of a university, then to justify the existence of the university, we need to be able to justify the 'rational' approach. Both Derrida and James directly confront the paradox that we cannot justify a rational approach through reason itself and both recognise that something more is

needed. The subtle analyses of Derrida and James differ on what kind of justification is needed with consequent implications for the justification of the University. Derrida's move is to associate the grounds for rationality with the grounds for performative statements such as 'I promise' which can only become true once said rather than having independent, pre-existing conditions on which their truth is founded. James's move is one which sees the links between theoretical and practical reasoning being so strong that the evidential weight for one lends support for the other. Both Derrida and James believe that there can be practical consequences for any area of theoretical knowledge but whereas Derrida sees this as a potential threat to the impartial pursuit of the truth, James sees this as the 'essence' of reason and states that "It is far too little recognized how entirely the intellect is built up of practical interests".

ii) The literary styles of James and Derrida are very different yet each style appropriately reflects their respective messages. Their styles are the performative aspects of their theoretical reasoning; their performances make sense only in the context of their audiences; a comparison between their different styles reveals important differences with respect to their implied audiences.

iii) The *unconditional* freedom to reason wherever truth leads does not support an unrestricted academic freedom for individual academics. The institution itself has an academic freedom to decide which disciplines to pursue and with what intensity and these 'institution' rights can conflict with those of individual academics employed within the institution and who make up the academic heart of the institution. The university operates within a social, political framework and, like any other institution, is subject to the constraint that it needs to recognise and acknowledge the rights and freedoms available to individuals, groups and other institutions in that society.

iv) A deconstructive approach to university texts suggests that external ties need not be as constraining or corrupting as Derrida's analysis of economic and political interests supposes but can empower and promote access to the truth. For example, UCL was established as the first English University to allow Jews, freethinkers and, later, women to study there. Yet UCL was set up using the commercial form of a joint stock company – a company which allowed funding to be raised privately because the state would not do so.

v) Analyses of the threats to the university have subsequently focused on the dangers of Rectors and the supporting administrative-bureaucratic system being responsible to trustees and other forces outside the academy to constrain the academic professoriat. This issue has been to resolve the conflict between the academics and the managerial forces. Introducing the student or graduate perspective changes the dynamic of this interaction into, at least, a triadic one between student/graduate, academic and management. When academics profess, the focus has been too intensely on the peer audience of other academics who evaluate their research rather than on the student or professional audiences (normally themselves alumni graduates) who will use and apply that knowledge.

vi) The foregoing arguments lend support for James' view that the best education that a university can provide is that a graduate will know a good person when they see one. Learning any trade or professional skill not only improves one's own skill but enables one to judge the skills of others – to know what counts as a good piece of (that kind of) work. The value of a university education has similar benefits but is more abstract. At the University's most theoretical core, the study of the humanities which, for James, includes a study of masterpieces, exemplars and enables students to

develop the “feeling for a good human job anywhere, the admiration of the really admirable..... the sense for ideal values”. When Derrida’s professoriat profess (for that is their profession) their performative acts demand an audience and it is that audience who judge the value of the performance. While Derrida has a focus on the academic audience, James reminds us that knowledge needs to be used by student/graduates and by society to resolve practical, and pressing personal and social problems.