

## **B1 Beaumaris Lounge, Wednesday 5 December 12.45 -13.15**

### ***Having Faith in the University: A Philosophical Study (0162)***

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#### **Post-truth, fake news, and the loss of faith in the university**

A heightened discrepancy between the university and society is now evident. On the policy level, discourses of excellence and value-for-money press upon universities – on both academics and students - while, on the societal level, there are calls for impact, skills, employability and marketable knowledge. Additionally, in a post-truth and fake news era, universities struggle to establish their legitimacy, and some students even report that they may actually be doing themselves a disservice by taking a higher education degree. All this is symptomatic of a wide societal, and even worldly, *loss of faith* in the university (Readings, 1997; Canaan & Shumar, 2010). From being an institution associated by society as having valued sets of insights into the world through its highly specialised knowledge systems, the university today is a target of suspicion from the wider world, being separately associated with privilege, elitism, arcaneness, and a lack of trustworthiness (Gibbs, 2004). More deeply still, in the wake of poststructuralism and in a period of ‘anti-foundationalism’ (Peters & Besley, 2017), where there is felt to be no knowledge foundation for the university firmly on which to stand, it can be plausibly contended that poststructuralist theories and agendas have effectively undermined the very institution they were presumably defending (Barnett & Bengtsen, 2017). Accordingly, the wider societal and worldly loss of faith in the university seems often to be buttressed from within the academy itself.

#### **Methodological approach**

Our study is anchored within the research field of the *philosophy of higher education*, launched almost 30 years ago (Barnett, 1990), and with added recent momentum (Barnett, 2016; Stoller & Kramer, 2018; Bengtsen & Barnett, 2018). Here, we especially examine the nature of the loss of faith in universities, and we explore the possibility of there being opportunities for universities to regain the faith of the wider world. Our principal tack is to focus on knowledge, and to come at it via a realist perspective, indeed by drawing on two forms of ontological realisms: the critical realism of Roy Bhaskar (2008) and the speculative realism of Graham Harman (2005). Also, we

draw from the understanding of faith to be found in the philosophy of Gabriel Marcel (1952) and of the philosophy of fecundity in the work of Paul Feyerabend (1999).

### **Findings - Integration of knowledge within life**

In the presentation, we shall focus on our two main findings:

#### *Knowledge as assisting in the fulfilment of life*

Instead of seeing knowledge as a means of distancing universities and higher education *from* the surrounding world, natural environment and socio-cultural milieu, we develop an account of knowledge understood as an opening of life. Knowledge is a responsiveness to the way other lifeforms and materials imprint us with their different forms of being and becoming and how we, through knowledge and knowing efforts, also become *a part of them*. Through knowledge we gain insight into our surroundings and environment, and through research even more subtle and strange dimensions of the world are revealed to us. However, knowledge may also lead us in to darker places and confront us with layers of reality which may be unsettling or even terrifying. We examine, in line with the idea of ecologies of the university (Barnett, 2018) and the mystery of knowledge (Masschelein, 2011), how knowledge and higher education may contribute to a wider societal need to become closer connected with the whole world, including but going well beyond the human domain.

#### *Knowledge as engagement in societal life*

Instead of seeing knowledge as a means of separating universities and the wider society, we present knowledge understood as a relational bond and ‘social contract’ (or even ‘pact’, Rousseau, 1968) between the institution and society. In this mode, the university does not speak *of* and *about* society, but *from* and *for* society. Knowledge is part of the lived life of society and becomes a *living* of that life, mediated through knowledge; and helps – or can help – to further that living. Through knowledge and its promulgation, the university is well-placed to widen and to enliven the public sphere in totally new ways. By ‘public sphere’ we have in mind the positive critiques that look to a multiplicity of publics, to which the academy might be sensitive (Barnett, 2018).

This path connects, too, to the anti-colonisation debate, prompted especially by those such as de Sousa Santos (2014), in advancing the idea of ‘epistemicide’. In other words, this is a path that is critical of the academy’s past, in silencing voices, as well as having now opportunities to engage anew with those hitherto without voices. As Lingis argues (1998), there is an ethical imperative embedded within research and knowledge, where academics through knowledge can release the voices of the marginalized, the outsiders, the obscure, and the persecuted. Through promulgating knowledge, the academy may speak not for itself, but for others and in the place of others. This matter connects, too, to recent studies of how knowledge may foster academic citizenship (Macfarlane, 2007), the citizen scholar (Arvanitakis & Hornsby, 2016), and academic entrepreneurialism for societal value (Shumar & Robinson, 2018).

### **Conclusion – restoring faith in universities**

The current strained relation between universities and society is ultimately a matter of faith. Having faith in the universities and its members and partners means to trust that its pursuit of and interest in knowledge is meaningful, worthwhile, and can and will change the world for the better. Having faith in the university, through its fundamental interest in knowledge is not immaterial, and to the contrary, faith ‘must be thought as bound up with reality.’ (Marcel, 1952, p.39). Faith is an ‘act’ (p.44) that becomes the very link between the will to know and the social reality it is embedded within. Faith points to belief in something that is at the same time real *and* mysterious – calling for engagement and commitment, even if the entity in question (here, the university) is glimpsed only fleetingly.