

## Knowledge as a Public Good of Higher Education (0137)

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Discussions about the public good of Higher Education (HE) have a long history. The philosopher Immanuel Kant was perhaps the first to articulate the notion that universities could provide a public good. He suggested they could act as a critical ally to national governments, the professions and society more broadly. For Kant, the philosophy faculty's inherent challenge to the law and medicine taught in the Prussian universities of his day, created more critical, and therefore superior, practitioners. Kant suggests the pursuit of knowledge, which he linked to an Enlightenment concept of empirical truth, formed the basis for this criticality and universities needed freedom from the state in order to best fulfil this role.

In his autobiography, John Stuart Mill ([1873] 1981) explores the relationship between individual happiness and the happiness of society as a whole. He argues that 'Those only are happy ... who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness', which he suggests can be found in 'the happiness of others' or 'the public good' (in Small 2013, 107). Mill was particularly interested in exploring the role of art, and most specifically poetry, in awakening individual sensibilities to what he perceived to be higher-order pleasures. Mill linked this redefinition of utilitarianism to education in general and HE in particular, suggesting that a 'higher level of education brings higher intellectual and aesthetic pleasures within our grasp' (in Small 2013, 123).

Ultimately, Mills' arguments for education as a public good are actually arguments for knowledge as an end in itself; knowledge may make us 'Socrates dissatisfied', or open our minds to the pleasures of poetry but it serves little practical utility. Echoes of this role for education can be seen in the writing of Mill's near contemporaries, in particular Newman's ([1852] 1959) notion that 'Knowledge is capable of being its own end. Such is the constitution of the human mind, that any kind of knowledge, if it be really such, is its own reward' (96). Arnold (1904) similarly claimed that 'The ideal of a general, liberal training is to carry us to knowledge of ourselves and the world. The circle of knowledge comprehends both and we should all have some notion, at any rate of the whole circle of knowledge' (399).

Hannah Arendt further expanded upon the concept of knowledge as the public good of education in her notion that schools and universities play a special role in preserving and transmitting society's accumulated collective knowledge and understanding of the world for future generations. She argues

it is because children are born 'into an already existing world' that educators have a specific responsibility to pass on society's knowledge 'even though they may, secretly or openly, wish it were other than it is' (1954, 185–86). When the role of education is conceived of in this way it suggests a move away from knowledge, and towards more instrumental public good claims for higher education, may belie a broader intellectual crisis in society's collective sense of any body of knowledge being sufficiently worth passing on to future generations.

After World War Two, the economic definition of public good provided by Paul Samuelson (1954) had come to dominate the discourse of HE and Arendt was writing in response to a growing challenge to the view that education could be justified in its own terms and that knowledge as an end in itself could be considered a public good. The university and its intellectual products came to be perceived as instrumental to a range of national, social, economic and political goals (Delanty 2001, 34). Not only the relationship between the state and HE changed but the relationship between the academy and knowledge also changed. Instead of a liberal view of knowledge being considered as an end in itself, knowledge becomes an instrumental means to achieving public goods however they may be defined.

This epistemological shift predominantly represents the views of policy makers, nonetheless it was largely welcomed within the academy as the experience of the Second World War and, of the holocaust in particular, served to discredit 'grand narratives' including the Enlightenment-inspired positivism, empiricism and belief in ultimate truth in knowledge. The pursuit of public good provided a moral justification for HE when Enlightenment values fell out of favour.

Since this time, successive redefinitions of public good in the discourse of government HE policy documents have shifted the focus away from knowledge outcomes that can benefit everyone in society to a more individualised terrain of skills for employability which can result in increased earnings and job security. Public good has been redefined as the collective private gain. This has been challenged by some within the academy with only partial success because, as previously, it falls into an intellectually receptive climate. While anything tainted with 'neoliberalism' is challenged, many academics see a role for themselves in relation to promoting social justice and social mobility or supporting students with individual projects of transformation. Such goals reinforce, rather than challenge, the instrumental and individualised agenda of government in relation to HE. They say little about knowledge as a collective social project and, through the promotion and inculcation of particular values, run the risk of abandoning academic freedom and the questioning ethos of HE and thereby diminishing the social role of the university in relation to criticality.

## References

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