Thinking With Each Other: the Peculiar Practice of the University

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This chapter enquires into the nature of university teaching. I consider whether Alasdair MacIntyre’s notion of a practice, together with some of his related ideas, is useful to us here. My argument is that MacIntyre’s talk of incommensurable rationalities tells in the end against the fragmentation of higher education and rather points to one distinctive and important role for the university: that the university should be conceived in some respects as a therapeutic community, whose function it is to encourage and enable its members to think together.

It is a familiar truth that one can only think for oneself if one does not think by oneself (Alasdair MacIntyre, 1987, p. 24).

I RE-DIFFERENTIATING THE UNIVERSITY

This essay has been written immediately after the publication of the UK government’s White Paper on the future shape and funding of the country’s system of higher education (DfES, 2003). Government policies come and go, and it has been said that this particular White Paper is tinged with green: that is to say, there is a statutory consultation period in which government is open to persuasion. Nevertheless there seem to be broad movements of thinking about higher education taking place on which this essay may bear, independently of policy changes that may perhaps prove ephemeral. I must emphasise two things at the outset. The first is that when I write about ‘university teaching’ I am referring to the activity of academics employed in universities of the sort we find in the Western world. That activity is usually taken to include teaching, research and management or administration, in varying proportions. I do not mean only to refer to the business of giving lectures and taking seminars, still less to imply that teaching is the main purpose of the university. The second is that I write from the perspective of a particular academic reasonably at home in the Arts and Social Science Faculties of a fairly traditional
university. My thesis may be wholly inappropriate to the hard sciences and to other areas.

The broader movement of thinking to which I alluded above concerns the possible fragmentation of the university system. We have had a system where, especially since the abolition of the binary divide between universities and polytechnics at the beginning of the 1990s, all universities did very much the same kinds of things, albeit to different extents. Virtually all taught liberal subjects such as History, and virtually all taught vocational subjects such as Law, Medicine, Education and Engineering. All were places of research as well as teaching: in fact the connection between teaching and research has often been held to be the defining feature of the modern university. It was thus possible to speak or write about ‘the university’ in the confidence that your words applied to a greater or lesser degree to all the universities of the UK.

There is no automatic case for nostalgia for this state of affairs. Its relatively recent genesis needs to be remembered, and something was lost when the polytechnics, with their more vocational mission and greater sense of commitment to local communities and local economies (a commitment which has had to be re-built for the whole of higher education by the creation of ‘third stream’ funding),1 were encouraged to imitate the older universities. Then too the system shows all the marks of the ‘de-differentiation’ often held to be characteristic of late modernity or what some call the ‘postmodern condition’,2 and it has been remarkably well-adapted to the creation of the massive league tables in which everything appears to be commensurable with everything else and all individuality and distinctiveness is obliterated.

However, what appears now to be being contemplated is the re-introduction of difference into higher education on an unprecedented scale. Why, it is being asked, should all universities be expected to do exactly the same kind of thing? The question bears with particular force against the connection between teaching and research. Some universities are to be encouraged to develop their strengths in teaching, which is to say of course that they will not be places where research is carried out to a significant extent. The White Paper declares that ‘There is already a great deal of diversity within the sector. But it needs to be acknowledged and celebrated, with institutions both openly identifying and playing to their strengths’ (1.38). Most clearly of all, there is envisaged a higher education sector that:

Acknowledges and celebrates the differences between institutions as each defines and implements its own mission. We see all HEIs excelling in teaching and reaching out to low participation groups, coupled with strengths in one or more of: research; knowledge transfer; linking to the local and regional economy (DfES, 2003 1.40)

This is explicitly to sever teaching and research for a substantial proportion of universities. The question of funding points to further possibilities of differentiation. If some universities charge high ‘top-up’
fees to students who will pay them from the increased future earnings made possible by the prestigious degrees they have acquired, then quite radical differences between universities are thereby assumed and of course reinforced.

Before the publication of the White Paper a number of questions were posed by the Secretary of State for Education, Charles Clarke, in a Higher Education Issues discussion document posted on the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) website in November 2002. The opening section is entitled ‘Research: do good research and teaching go together?’ Its first two questions are:

1. Should we enable more of the best researchers to focus on research, and develop a more professional teaching force for Universities, specialising in teaching? Will pressure for such distinctions grow if universities spend more on hiring top researchers?
2. What about institutions with different focuses? Should some specialise in teaching, and others in research—perhaps developing more graduate schools? Should institutions group together to play to their strengths?

The third question asks ‘Do we need better measures for helping students understand the quality of teaching in different institutions?’—a question that could hardly be more cleverly designed to elicit the response that we need to move away from the current idea of a single standard of quality, as enshrined in league-tables, towards the idea that universities may have different styles of teaching, suitable for different students (the implication being that some students will thrive in self-directed study with occasional contact with the research stars, while others will need more intensive tuition). Section 7, Funding and Finance: Who should pay for HE teaching? includes the following questions:

47. Is it right that every course should cost the same when the benefits can be so different? Some courses may only marginally increase average earnings, whereas others promise a substantial boost to earnings? [sic]
49. Would differential fees produce more discerning customers—and create a vibrant market in HE—or would many students settle for cheaper courses of a lower standard?

The general tendency of these questions is plain enough and the White Paper that followed them encourages the thought that they were rhetorical. Question 47 expects the answer ‘yes’, while Question 49 reveals that market theory is one of the drivers of this exercise. But where previously the market offered all students-as-consumers essentially the same product, its relative quality to be read off from the league tables, now the market will offer a diversity of goods, and the bitter complaints of those who have been sold wares that turn out not to be ‘fit for purpose’ will ensure quality. Those whose aspirations do not go beyond the cheap and shoddy will be with us, as always, but then that, by inference, is all they deserve. It is part
of the price you pay for a radically differentiated system where the University of Oxford and the University of Didcot⁴ have little in common beyond the title of ‘university’. Universities were invited to comment on the Higher Education Issues discussion document, but no deadline was given: which was taken in many quarters to indicate that Government knew the answers it wanted to hear. The outline of Higher Education policy seems clear.

II FRAGMENTATION

It is interesting to consider this fragmentation in the light of Alasdair MacIntyre’s writings. There are many elements of his thought that are relevant here, but I shall focus on three: his explicit remarks about higher education, his theory of practices, which is intended partly to meet the problem that we seem to live in a world of different, incommensurable and fragmented rationalities, and his criticism of therapy and the therapeutic culture. The immediate relevance of MacIntyre’s ideas is that on the one hand his ideas might seem to underpin a vision of higher education in which universities are committed to different and incompatible traditions: MacIntyre himself often leans in this direction. On the other hand, in the face of the fragmentation of universities and university teaching it is tempting to play what might be called a MacIntyrean defence. This would take the form of insisting that university teaching is a distinct practice, in MacIntyre’s terms, a ‘coherent and complex form of socially established co-operative human activity’ through which its own internal goals are realised and its characteristic virtues deployed. Thus it might be possible to outline a notion of university teaching resistant to the fragmentation of the system by demonstrating the ineliminability of the connection between teaching and research, or to argue for the centrality to university practice of the critical dimension associated with the liberal view of higher education. Indeed it might be thought that any persuasive account of what is common to all university teaching would be useful at the present juncture.

It is necessary to begin with an outline of the relevant elements of MacIntyre’s ideas, as I understand them. Once upon a time, so the story goes, there was a world, such as that of the Ancient Greeks, where the telos or goal of human life was generally understood, or at least assumed. Such a society was based on shared practices and traditions against which background disagreements were at any rate disagreements about the same thing. Argument and discussion could take place within what we have in later times come to call a ‘form of life’. There might be dispute about whether a particular argument was valid, or whether a piece of evidence was good evidence, but there was not dispute about validity itself or about whether evidence was required in cases where truth, in addition to validity, was sought.

Our own age, by contrast, is a fissiparous and fragmented one. Different traditions of thinking about the just and the good have come down to us,
each leaving its traces and an aura of its authority. As is familiar, MacIntyre makes out a case for claiming that we can distinguish at least three major traditions. There is the Aristotelian tradition, with its essentially teleological approach, as it was taken up by Aquinas and became transformed into Thomism; the Humean, in which the ends of human life are given by our natural passions, so that practical rationality becomes reduced to instrumental; and the modern liberal and subjective cast of thinking which regards values as matters of taste or preference, with the result that we live in a world which has largely lost the resources needed properly to think about the ends and goals of life, and to oppose the manipulation of preferences on the part of those with an interest in exploiting us. (I say at least three traditions because MacIntyre also in places distinguishes a separate Augustinian tradition.)

For the denizens of each of these traditions, MacIntyre writes, there is little real possibility of argument with those from a rival version. The instrumentalists of modernity, for instance, tend to listen in blank incomprehension to those whose idea of value challenges their own means-end cast of thinking. For them it is just obvious and unchallengeable—an article of faith, we might say—that what is good is so in virtue of its being conducive to efficiency and effectiveness; that it leads to whatever ends happen to have been chosen or laid down. For those of us in whose world-view it is a basic assumption that most of what we think of as human nature is given by experience, by contrast, the idea of there being determinate tele or goals of human existence seems merely quaint.

MacIntyre expresses himself in this kind of way in many places. Towards the end of Whose Justice? Which Rationality? (1988) for example he writes that we can only advance critique or evaluation of claims and ideas in terms specific to some particular tradition. To abstract them from such traditions of enquiry is a nonsense, requiring us to take the ‘view from nowhere’; yet this, MacIntyre thinks, is precisely what modern liberalism attempts, ‘thus for the most part effectively precluding the voices of tradition outside liberalism from being heard’ (p. 399). Universities, he thinks, have been particularly at fault here, maintaining a ‘fictitious objectivity’ (ibid.), acting in ways that presuppose the existence of ‘shared, even if unfathomable, universal standards of rationality’ (p. 400) while at the same time the possibility of such standards—of truth, importance, cogency and so on—disappears, especially in the humanities, for lack of those coherent traditions of enquiry in which such standards could be based (ibid.).

One implication of this argument, as Dunne and MacIntyre (2002) note, is that there might be universities committed to different traditions of enquiry. Of course this possibility is realised in the USA and in parts of continental Europe, at least to the extent that universities there often proclaim a religious foundation and at least nominally religious orientation. Might there be, along the lines MacIntyre seems to suggest, postmodern universities, supercomplex ones (cp. Barnett, 1999), ones committed to Enlightenment or Aristotelian/Thomistic ideals? We cannot be far from having Muslim universities in secular Western countries, just
as we are seeing the establishment of Faith schools; and perhaps there will be universities as well as schools and colleges where Darwinism is taught, if it is taught at all, as just one more theory alongside Creationism.

If higher education fragmented along lines marked by different traditions then we really would have reached the point where we ceased to talk and think with each other. This in turn would deprive universities of much of their point: that student scientists impressed by the power and achievements of their discipline should be brought up short by aspiring philosophers of science eager to point out to them that the hard sciences have difficulty in articulating a satisfactory account of scientific method; that austere, Leavisite young literary critics and those intoxicated by reader response theory should come up against each other; that analytical philosophers should learn to defend themselves (or discover the difficulty of doing so) against deconstructionists insisting that all philosophy is fatally infected by metaphoricity and meets defeat at the hands of literature; and so on. All this seems so proper and desirable that it is tempting not to take MacIntyre seriously here. But at least one good reason for doing so, as we have seen, is that in the UK at least one possible consequence of government higher education policy is a fragmentation of higher education along lines that, if they are not entirely similar, might have similar effects.

III PRACTICE AND PRACTICES

I shall return in Section IV to the oddity of MacIntyre’s strategy in representing different rationalities as incommensurable, given that philosophers since the time of Socrates have undertaken the task of interpreting between, if not bridging, them. But this, then, is the background against which we might turn to other parts of MacIntyre’s writings for support for the idea that there could be something common to, or even functioning as a unifying element in, university teaching. I shall first focus on his notion of practices and what seem to me to be its limitations, especially in the context of thinking about higher education.

First, I agree with those who find MacIntyre’s notion of practices opaque and dubious. As Miller (1994) observes, there is a distinction to be made between, in Miller’s terminology, self-contained practices and purposive ones. Self-contained practices are those such as chess or football, and games in general, where the point of the activity lies within itself. There is no external end (constituted by such as fame, money, exhilaration) at which chess by its nature aims. Purposive practices are those which, while conforming to MacIntyre’s definition (‘coherent and complex form[s] of socially established co-operative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity’) nevertheless have some end beyond themselves.

Medicine, as Miller notes, supplies an excellent and highly Aristotelian example. The best kind of doctor attends to the goods internal to the medical tradition. She looks to the well-being of the patient as a rounded human being, for instance (and thus has an eye to the well-being of the community as a whole), rather than treating symptoms in isolation. She tries to practise her craft in ways that develop her own attunedness to her patients (any attempt to set a norm of so many minutes per consultation is anathema to her), and takes care to share her developing understanding so that the medical profession as a whole is enhanced. But none of this amounts to very much if her patients fail to improve. As Miller notes, we do not praise the surgeon, however skilful he is and whatever remarkable procedures he introduces, if the death rate from his operations is unusually high.

MacIntyre tends to write as if practices in general were self-contained rather than purposive. This in turn leads to two problems. The first, obviously enough, is that his account of a practice does not do justice to whatever element of purposiveness may be held to be part of what is at stake. Higher education is a good example here. Whether it is teaching or the characteristic mixture of teaching, research and administration of modern universities that is thought to be a practice (as MacIntyre denies) or whether the practice rather consists in being an academic historian, philosopher, etc. (which is MacIntyre’s preferred picture) something seems missing from the picture if the students do not learn, if the books and articles written by academics remain unread because there is no ongoing debate to which they contribute or new debate which they instigate.

The second problem is a corollary of the first. Without the element of purposiveness it is difficult to see what prevents a practice from falling into self-indulgence and self-absorption, from coming in this respect to resemble an endlessly sophisticated tea-ritual. MacIntyre of course connects his notion of practices with his account of practical wisdom, and it may be that self-absorption is a constant risk of activities whose dominant mode of rationality is practical wisdom. I have illustrated this elsewhere (Smith, 1999) with the literary example of the butler, Stevens, from Ishiguro’s (1989) novel The Remains of the Day. Stevens is fascinated by the question of what makes a butler really first-rate. His hypothesis centres on high professionalism or ‘dignity’, and he is pleased that the Hayes Society, a guild for butlers of the top flight, refuses to publish membership criteria beyond ‘that the applicant be possessed of a dignity in keeping with his position’ (p. 33). Stevens’ insistence that his is ‘an idealistic generation for whom the central question was not simply one of how well one practised one’s skills but to what end one did so’ (p. 116) appears self-deceiving. He has quite lost sight of the question of ends, as is shown most vividly in his uncritical adulation of his employer, the Nazi sympathiser Lord Darlington, and in his neglect of his own dying father. The exercise of his craft has become everything, and the virtues that should underpin his practice—so central of course to MacIntyre’s account—have become mere virtuosity (Shorter Oxford Dictionary: ‘excessive attention to technique or to the production of special effects in vocal or instrumental music (also transp. in art or literature)’.

It may be that it is just such a descent into virtuosity or preciousness that is risked by MacIntyre’s insistence that the teacher ‘should think of her or himself as a mathematician, a reader of poetry, an historian or whatever, engaged in communicating craft and knowledge to apprentices’ (Dunne and MacIntyre, 2002, p. 5), where the emphasis is clearly on immersion in the discipline rather than on the matter of teaching, here conceived, along the lines of a simplistic transmission model, as communicating craft and knowledge to apprentices. MacIntyre writes (p. 9) that ‘the life of a teacher of mathematics, whose goods are the goods of mathematics, is one thing; the life of a teacher of music whose goods are the goods of music is another’. This seems a recipe for the very compartmentalisation of education that MacIntyre elsewhere deplores; and the picture drawn here is in my view only too familiar as a picture of the kind of academic who has retreated into his or her specialism as a haven where wider perspectives, debates and engagements can be evaded (‘Of course I am a medieval historian, but this isn’t exactly my period’). It is a picture of the antiquarian rather than the historian, the narrow specialist rather than the intellectual who acknowledges wider responsibilities.

Even if we could defend the idea of university teaching being a distinct and coherent practice, MacIntyre of course is himself disinclined towards it, explicitly denying that there is anything more to being an academic than being a philosopher, an historian, a mathematician and so on. Of course we do not have to follow him here, and I shall later argue that we should not. Those academics who explore the fertile border-lands between (say) philosophy and literature, or politics and geography, do not seem to have an obvious place in MacIntyre’s scheme of things: this fact, together with his dismissal of the very possibility of the philosophy of education (as opposed to the philosophy of history and history teaching, etc.), seems pragmatically designed to keep the educationists at arm’s length (a design with which of course one may on occasion strongly sympathise).

IV RATIONALITIES AND THEIR THERAPY

We appear to have reached an impasse. MacIntyre’s account of incommensurable rationalities has the capacity further to undermine such unity and coherence as our university systems possess; and his notion of practices will not restore what is missing. In this section I want to explore a different line of thought. It begins with the oddity of supposing that our world, perhaps uniquely, consists of a proliferation of rationalities so numerous and various that agreement and even sensible discussion are precluded from the outset. It is worth reminding ourselves in more detail exactly what MacIntyre has written on this point. He claims that our culture lacks resources for:

Securing rational agreement on what it would be relevant and important for members of a contemporary educational public to share in the way of belief, in the way of perspective, in the way of debate. We possess in our culture too many different and incompatible modes of justification. We do
not even have enough agreement to be able to arrive at a common mind about what it is that we should be quarrelling about (1987, p. 28).

Elsewhere (*Three Rival Versions*, 1990, p. 225) he writes that outside the field of technical expertise, where rational agreement is readily arrived at (or at least appears to be), for example, in literary interpretation, ‘unconstrained and limitless absence of agreement has gradually become the order of the day’.

Since MacIntyre is often vague on the details of his claims perhaps it will be helpful to explore further the specific example he gives here, that of literary interpretation. MacIntyre’s point seems to be that any text—poem, play, novel, film—can be read in any number of ways. Dickens’ *Bleak House*, for instance, can be read through the eyes of formalism, New Criticism or reader response theory. It can be read as a Leavisite would read it, as a work of profound moral insight, or as Derrida or a Derrida-inspired deconstructionist might read it, as a text that foregrounds the instability of meaning and of texts themselves. But the very fact that we can name and distinguish these different schools of criticism, let alone analyse their theoretical strengths and weaknesses, does not show that there is ‘unconstrained and limitless absence of agreement’. It shows rather that there is a fair measure of agreement on what are the significant critical approaches to *Bleak House*, which is why, if anyone suggests the important thing about this novel is that it is ‘really about’ nineteenth-century architecture or that it contains a coded prediction of the First World War, we do not accept it as another valid interpretation.

It is above all odd that MacIntyre should write as if different rationalities sit in separate, mutually impervious boxes when there are two kinds of thinkers whose province might be held to be the depiction and analysis of different rationalities: the philosopher and the therapist. To take the philosopher first, some of the earliest works of Western philosophy show this as the philosopher’s domain. In *The Republic* Plato represents Socrates as confronted with a very different rationality, that of Thrasymachus, from his own. Socrates struggles to make sense of the notion of goodness or justice (*dikaiosune*) in what we now see as philosophical terms; Thrasymachus replies bleakly that what counts as *dikaiosune* is simply whatever those in a position to impose their will on others want to count as *dikaiosune*. In the *Euthyphro* Socrates comes up against the young man who gives his name to the dialogue. Convinced that he is doing the right thing in having his father prosecuted for causing the death of a slave, Euthyphro reveals that he can only ‘think inside the box’ of the rationality of conventional *mores*, while Socrates has the ability to stand to one side and ask whether those *mores* are themselves ethically sound (‘Is what is good good because the gods approve it, or do the gods approve what they do because it is good?’). And it is not a telling point that Thrasymachus, and to a lesser extent Euthyphro, are not persuaded to widen their viewpoints by the end of the dialogue. For the reader comes to understand that different and competing rationalities are in evidence here and learns how to estimate them: and it is philosophy that teaches the reader to do so.
It would be easy enough too to take similar examples from more recent philosophy: for instance of the way in which Wittgenstein talks of different rule-governed activities or language-games, which are very close to what MacIntyre means by different rationalities. Witchdoctors talking about witchcraft and physicists talking about atoms have different criteria for the truth of statements, and different notions of reality itself. In *The Idea of a Social Science*, Peter Winch draws on Wittgenstein to argue that ‘intelligibility takes many and varied forms’ (1958, p. 102). This precisely does not entail mutual incomprehensibility between cultures and rationalities. For Wittgenstein would have us see that if we embark on the patient and detailed work of examining these different rationalities we shall not see that they are all wholly separate and incommensurable, any more than we shall find that there is something common to them all. Rather we shall find that there are ‘similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that’ (Wittgenstein, 1953, 1.66). The painstaking job of exploring these is, according to Wittgenstein, precisely that of the philosopher.

The other figure who helps make different rationalities comprehensible to each other is the psychotherapist, psychoanalyst or clinical psychologist, whom I shall refer to for convenience as the therapist. Consider for example Freud’s well-known case of the young man who suddenly and for no obvious reason decides to lose weight. Freud explains that he is unconsciously longing to be rid of his German cousin, Dick, and the German word for ‘fat’ is *dick*. Or consider the obsessive hand-washer, where the therapist concludes that the young woman is driven by unacknowledged feelings of guilt about her habit of masturbation. In such cases the therapist shows how neurotic behaviour makes a kind of sense—is perversely rational—in its own terms.

In *After Virtue* MacIntyre has some famous and caustic things to say about therapy. The therapist, he thinks, occludes the distinction between manipulative and nonmanipulative personal relations, treating ‘ends as given, as outside his scope; the therapist’s concern also is with technique, with effectiveness in transforming neurotic symptoms into directed energy, maladjusted individuals into well-adjusted ones’ (p. 29). The therapist cannot engage in moral debate, being restricted from his own point of view to ‘the realm of fact, the realm of means, the realm of measurable effectiveness’ (p. 29).

Now MacIntyre’s critique here is well-aimed against *a particular version* of therapy, and since that version or brand is widely prevalent the critique is valuable. As I shall make clear in the next section, however, this is not the only way that therapy can be conceived. To anticipate: there are conceptions of therapy in which therapists see a major part of their work as consisting first in helping people to see that they are distressed because harm is being done to them, and second, in encouraging them to deal with these real sources of damage, rather than poking around in the supposed contents of the unconscious (‘Your symptoms are those of stress. You are stressed because of the way your line-manager is treating you. That can be construed as bullying. Your union representative may be able to help you with that’—or rather a lengthier conversation to the same effect).
V THE THERAPEUTIC UNIVERSITY

It may seem that MacIntyre is strangely blind to the capacity of philosophy and of a kind of therapy to interpret different rationalities to each other, and it is true that in some of his work the picture is of different traditions and rationalities as separated by chasms, across which communication cannot reach. Yet in *Three Rival Versions* there is a different kind of account. There he writes of the university as a place ‘where rival and antagonistic views of rational justification, such as those of genealogists and Thomists, are afforded the opportunity both to develop their own enquiries, in practice and in the articulation of the theory of that practice, and to conduct their intellectual and moral warfare’ (p. 222). The university is then ‘a place of constrained disagreement, of imposed participation in conflict, in which a central responsibility of higher education would be to initiate students into conflict’ (pp. 230–231).

If this seems less than revolutionary—how could a university worthy of the name not be a place where students learn that radically different ‘views of rational justification’ exist?—then we have missed two features of MacIntyre’s proposal here. The first is encapsulated in the words quoted above: ‘to develop their own enquiries, in practice’. Students are not merely to learn about a philosophy such as Thomism: they are to live it, because immersed in it. This is the only way to know a tradition, and unless traditions are known by being thus lived they cease to exist. Of course no student could be expected to live and absorb three or more ‘rival versions of moral enquiry’ during the three years of undergraduate study, and MacIntyre is more than happy to draw the conclusion: ‘a set of rival universities would result’ (p. 234), each no doubt a source of mystery and suspicion to the others. We see here perhaps most clearly why the idea of philosophy or a kind of therapy as interpreting different rationalities to each other is of no use to MacIntyre: it militates against his preferred conclusion.

The second feature of MacIntyre’s proposal that we should attend to is his hostility to that ‘arena of neutral objectivity’ (p. 231), the liberal university. Such a university, by implication, encourages its students merely to learn about different traditions, while effectively claiming to constitute itself in a way that does not prejudge in favour of any one of the various ideas and traditions whose study it facilitates (a word which has especial resonance in this context). But, MacIntyre thinks, the liberal university is not neutral at all. It derives from wider liberalism assumptions and outlooks such as the idea that it is possible to provide a framework of rational principles that will accommodate widely different conceptions of the good, the foregrounding of the individual as ‘unencumbered’, his or her free choices lying at the source of moral value. Unquestioning faith in science and the veneration of skills are bound up with these assumptions, contriving together with the other tenets of liberalism to suggest that between subjectivity on the one hand and objectivity on the other there is no space for the Thomistic practical reasoning of ‘the individual qua enquirer into his or her good and the good of his or her community’ (*Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 339).
Since MacIntyre wrote about ‘reconceiving the university’ in *Three Rival Versions* the features of the ‘liberal university’ that he took issue with there have of course become more marked, in the rampant growth of what has come to be called ‘performativity’. The student has become essentially a chooser, equipped with league tables to enable her to make the appropriate choice of institution; upon entering which she will be constituted as a collection of programmable skills (key skills, transferable skills), able to demonstrate possession of the learning outcomes which the course or its modules aim to deliver. The dominance of technical reason and the influences of managerialism and of crude notions of science have become even stronger. And, crucially, these tendencies, coupled with the ever-worsening staff–student ratio and consequent pressure to run fewer tutorials or seminars or replace them with computerised interactive learning packages, have diminished still further the possibility of experiencing the university as an enquiring community: of, as the title of this chapter has it, thinking with each other.

If this is so, and if the fragmentation of higher education along MacIntyrean lines or lines laid down by government restructuring equally militates against that sharing of ideas that has been the peculiar practice of the modern university at its best, how is that practice to be recovered and preserved? I suggest that a central and unifying feature of the university should be a critical engagement precisely with the tenets of neo-liberalism and performativity, and that an important role of the university lies in ensuring that space is made for such critical engagement. I suggest further that, in the limited and specialised sense intended here, that role should be thought of as therapeutic. In what remains I sketch some of what this might entail in practice.4

First, in the face of the widespread reluctance (which MacIntyre himself notes: *Three Rival Versions*, p. 221) to think about what the university is for, or the tendency even to claim that the question has become redundant (cp. Blake, Smith and Standish, 1998, pp. 49 ff), there is much to be gained by addressing this question explicitly as part of the formal undergraduate curriculum. In my own experience students are generally surprised and pleased to discover that this question—which often worries them personally on the level of a muted anxiety about ‘just what I’m doing here anyway’—can be thought about in a structured way, and that there are resources (ideas and a literature) for doing so. The idea of a liberal education, so familiar to readers of this kind of journal, as something intended to widen horizons and take the learner beyond his or her limited and particular world, can be a revelation.

Second, there must no doubt be aims and objectives, learning outcomes, level descriptors and the rest of the mechanistic and bureaucratic apparatus. There are indeed good reasons for these things since they have the function of letting the learner into the secret of what is supposed to be going on, and so work against the pull of what I earlier called ‘preciousness’. It is familiar however that if treated rigidly or taken too seriously the apparatus constrains learning. Sometimes the lecture or seminar must go where it goes; sometimes the teacher’s aim must be, in

Lyotard’s words, ‘to go there without knowing there’ (Lyotard, 1993, p. 73). This too, if opened up to discussion, can be interesting and liberating, for what is at stake is whether the student is the relatively passive recipient of a course or rather an active contributor to its philosophy and development.

Third, the nature and status of particular academic disciplines can be problematised to a greater degree than is usually the case: by which I mean that it is not at all unusual for students to be told that psychology, say, is a science, that it is objective, and that reports of personal experience in seminars or use of the first person in essays are unacceptable. Faculty- or university-wide programmes that require students to think about the nature of science or social science, or about how the arts subjects can make good their claims to knowledge, do much, where they exist, to challenge the compartmentalisation of the modern university and its propensity to develop subjects as separate and mutually incomprehensible areas of technical expertise. Above all such programmes are fertile ground for thinking together. To take just two examples from my own experience, I recall intense debate between a student lawyer appalled by the idea that social science might be a largely interpretative discipline, in furious argument with students of philosophy, politics and sociology eager to persuade him that objectivity of the kind he sought was a chimera. I recall impassioned argument between students who accepted that a mother’s love for her baby could only be talked about insofar as it could be measure by eye-contacts per minute, and students who regarded this approach as reductive. Here indeed were students thinking with each other.

Why, in the face of the criticisms routinely and often rightly levelled at therapy, should I suggest that the kind of teaching I have sketched above can usefully be thought of as therapeutic? To emphasise again: it is not therapeutic by virtue of concerning itself with the intra-psychic contents of students’ consciousnesses. Rather it can rightly be called therapeutic for three reasons. First, some of our dominant ‘rationalities’—the scientific, the performative, the managerial—have the characteristics of compulsions. Even when we understand their limitations and dangers intellectually they continue to exercise their fascination, for they tap into some of our deepest fantasies about order and control, and our deepest fears about chaos, personal responsibility and blame. That is why the business of the university needs to be therapeutic in the sense that Socrates saw his philosophy as therapeutic: as engaging not just with mistaken opinions but with motivated ones. The student, say, who wants to ‘get to the answers as quickly as possible without all this theory’ is not simply short of knowledge: he is recognisably in the grip of the assumptions of performativity, from which a certain kind of teaching can offer him release.

Second, it is therapeutic in demystifying for students what are the sources of and reasons for the university system in which they find themselves and which may seem inevitable and unalterable. Particular interests and power-struggles underlie it, as they do any institution: the
interest in ever-greater cost-effectiveness, for example, and the ambition by politicians to construct a more malleable higher-education sector unconstrained by older ideas of academic freedom. We do not readily think of therapy as having this function, perhaps, but there are conceptions of therapy which foreground the fact that distress can often be traced to events in the outside world and not to those in inner psychic space:

People are injured, psychologically as well as physically, not essentially by errors of their own judgement, the vagaries of their consciousness, lack of insight into their own motives or failures of their will, but by the operation of basically material powers and influences in the world around them. What really upsets the apple-cart and buggers up people’s lives and relationships is threatening their livelihood, throwing them out of work, stripping them of social meaning, depriving them of health and education, pillaging and destroying their environment, and so on (Smail, 1996).

Thus, too, in higher education it can for instance be deeply reassuring for a student to realise that this part of the lecture series, which she finds baffling, is based on the lecturer’s own research, because the department wants to make good its claim about the connection between its teaching and its highly-rated research.

Third, just as the good therapist knows how to draw the patient or client out, encourage her to say what she really thinks, suggest different ways of approaching a problem and so on, so too university teaching might be thought of as an activity in which helping people to think with each other is central and basic. I do not mean this in terms of particular techniques to be learned and applied somewhat mechanistically but as a kind of attunedness to the learner: an attunedness that has often been regarded as a defining feature of practical reason or judgment and is precisely to be distinguished from the operations of instrumental reason (cp. Smith, 1999). There is perhaps here the basis for a reconceptualising of university teaching that steers between the preciousness of older conceptions and the routine, efficient mechanised delivery of the newer model being enjoined upon us.

It may seem that we have reached, by a different and perhaps circuitous route, a conclusion not unlike MacIntyre’s that the answer to the question ‘What are universities for?’ is in significant part that they are places that take unusually seriously questions such as ‘What are universities for?’ (1990, p. 222). I have been concerned however to argue in terms which, if they are in some ways similar to MacIntyre’s, do not require the support of some of his more dubious claims, as they seem to me, especially about the nature of practices. And I have suggested that in the ‘therapeutic’ model that I have outlined there lies the possibility of revivifying that sharing of ideas which stands in opposition to the various forms of fragmentation that increasingly threaten the very idea of a university and the possibility of thinking fruitfully and creatively about the values and purposes of higher education.
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NOTES
1. The nature of this funding is well indicated by its earlier incarnation as HEROBAC, ‘Higher Education Reach Out into Business and the Community’.
2. ‘De-differentiation’ is particularly associated with the kind of analysis offered by Jean Baudrillard.
3. A fictitious example, in order not to give offence.