A Philosopher's Perspective on the UK's Higher Education

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Teaching in the Iron Cage

By

Brendan Larvor

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For Sarah

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PREFACE

My career as a philosophy teacher began in 1989, as a tutorial assistant in the philosophy department at Queen's University, Ontario, where I was a postgraduate student. That was the time before PowerPoint, when essays were written with a pen and preparing to give a lecture meant jotting down some reminders and finding a couple of white-board markers or some chalk. From 1991 onwards, I taught in the UK, at the universities of Oxford, Liverpool, Oxford again and (from 1997) Hertfordshire. Over the years, as the technology, policy environment and student expectations changed, I was often unsure of exactly what I was doing and why, or I was confused because I met something or someone that seemed to be at odds with what I assumed were the shared values of everyone in higher education. Many of the chapters that follow originated as efforts to understand my job, and I hope they add up to something useful to others.

The questions they address ought to rouse more interest in academic philosophers than they seem to. A brisk review of recent issues of the top[1] general philosophy journals in English produced zero articles about learning, teaching or education. In spite of being general journals, they carry articles on specialist topics (philosophy of music, philosophy of mathematics, philosophy of mind, and any amount of ethics). They carry no articles on education and pedagogy because curiosity about these topics is very low-value stock in the philosophical esteem economy. In its forty-year life, the *Journal of Applied Philosophy* has published twenty-four articles with the word 'education' in the title, and scarcely any of these could be said to bear directly on university teaching. This count of twenty-four includes the one article with the word 'teaching' in the title. I am sure that the editors of these journals would excuse themselves by pointing out that they receive no submissions on education and pedagogy.[2] Nobody hoping to make a career in philosophy would head for this part of the woods. One would not wish philosophers to be excessively occupied with thinking about our own day jobs. Nevertheless, "Know thyself!" says the oracle. If a large part of thine

[1] As listed by Brian Leiter, but other lists have pretty much the same titles.

[2] I have not submitted anything about philosophy of education or pedagogy to any of these journals.

job is teaching, then seeking self-knowledge must include thinking about pedagogy and education. All academic philosophers should spend some time thinking and writing about teaching, not just because they are teachers but because they are philosophers.

Some of the chapters in this book are previously published articles, while the more recent items originated as short blogposts. Other chapters are outputs of my work on the philosophy of mathematical practices and mathematical cultures. This field has a natural affinity with research in mathematics education—the question of how old mathematicians learn new theorems is related to, but not identical with, the question of how new mathematicians learn old theorems. At many points, reflection on mathematics education provides a foil or contrast for thinking about my work as a philosophy lecturer. Some of the articles were jointly authored, and I'm grateful to my co-authors (Jo Ahlberg, Karen François, John Lippitt, and Kathryn Weston) for working with me on those projects and for giving me permission to reprint our work here. The University of Hertfordshire supports its teaching staff to reflect on their practice, and I am especially grateful to colleagues in the Blended Learning Unit and its successors. My deepest debt, of course, is to the thousands of students who have passed through my classes, from the Canadians who looked with tolerant scepticism at a tutorial assistant just a few years older than themselves, through to the mature student who called out, twenty minutes in to a logic lecture, as I turned to write on the board, "Are you going to start making sense any time soon?" Not sure. Not altogether. Let's see.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

"The Case for Teaching Syllogistic Logic to Philosophy Students" was previously published in *Discourse* (the journal of the former Philosophy and Religious Studies Subject Centre) and Gil, Lancho and Manzano (eds) *Proceedings of the Second International Congress on Tools for Teaching Logic*.

"Students are Human Beings (Discuss)" was previously published in *Discourse.*

"Feeling the Force of Argument" was previously published in Andrea Kenkmann (ed.) *Teaching Philosophy*.

"Authoritarian vs Authoritative Teaching: Polya and Lakatos" was previously published in Hanna, Jahnke, and Pulte (eds) *Explanation and proof in mathematics: Philosophical and educational perspectives*.

"Wot U @ Uni 4? Expectations and actuality of studying philosophy at university" was written with John Lippitt and previously published in *Discourse*.

"Immortal Goods: Critical Friendships among Beginning Philosophers" was written with John Lippitt and Kathryn Weston and previously published in *Discourse*.

"Weber and Coyote: polytheism as a practical attitude" was previously published in *Sophia*.

"A Citizens' Assembly Approach to the BAME Awarding Gap" was written with Jo Ahlberg and previously published in the *Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change*.

"The Concept of Culture in Critical Mathematics Education" was written with Karen François and previously published in Ernest (ed.) *Philosophy of Mathematics Education Today*.

I'm grateful to the editors and publishers of these works, and my co-authors, for permission to reprint them here.

I'm grateful to Karen François for reading a draft and correcting some errors of fact.

INTRODUCTION

The Iron Cage of the title of this book is a reference to Max Weber (1864-1920), or rather to an expression introduced in a notoriously free translation of Weber's work by Talcott Parsons. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber argued that one of the factors underlying the emergence of modern capitalism in Europe was a kind of worldly asceticism that grew among low church protestants and puritans. The old religious idea of a vocation to priesthood or monastic living turned into the belief that God has a calling for each of us. If He wills it that you be a cobbler, then rising early and working long and hard at your holy calling of shoemaking is a religious duty. The money you make is not for enjoyment, of course, it is for reinvestment in the business—or in another business, and thus the separation of share-ownership and business management came into being. In the protestant tradesman and the Quaker factory owner, we find asceticism (sobriety, plain living, hard work) but of a worldly sort, immersed in trade and living in the commercial town centre rather than a monastery. Turning from spiritual to material development, over a longer timescale (millennia), Weber argues that relentless improvements in the matching of means to ends results in a rationalised, disenchanted world. "Disenchanted" here means that we no longer, at the level of social organisation, attempt to use supernatural means to achieve practical ends. The Archbishop of Canterbury may pray for the safety of those at sea, but we would not include his prayers among the measures likely to make a difference (lighthouses, sonar, accurate charts and weather reports, etc.).[3] "Rationalised" means that more and more of the human world is explicitly recorded, codified, indexed, standardised and optimised. The means for this in Weber's day was paper-based bureaucracy and above all, bureaucrats. Rationalisation does not only produce reliable, standardised material artefacts and information systems. It changes people, too. A large bureaucracy, be it commercial or governmental, requires an entire social

[3] Disenchantment does ***not*** mean that nobody practices religion, or is capable of wonder, or appreciates the beauty of nature or art. It does not even mean that nobody practices faith-healing. It means that society as a whole does not attempt to use supernatural means to achieve material ends. No government or large private corporation included the power of prayer in its response to the covid 19 pandemic, while it is certain some individuals and faith-communities asked for divine help.

class to staff it. These people must be punctual, punctilious, selected by public examination rather than nepotism or patronage, convinced of the importance of detailed notetaking and careful filing, and committed to an ethic of carrying out properly authorised instructions from further up the hierarchy. The office worker who expects to live a humble, orderly, nine-to-five life, keeping the files up to date and the corporate wheels going round, is another kind of worldly ascetic. It is thanks to the dominance of bureaucracy as our principal form of social organisation that gaining formal academic qualifications is now considered essential preparation for adult life. Academics who complain about administration should be careful what they wish for.

We need not endorse every detail of Weber's history of capitalism to see the relevance of his work. Teaching in UK higher education is shaped by the institutional and bureaucratic context in which it takes place. It is easy to moan about the administrative load on academics. I do some of that myself. However, that administrative load is not the result of malice or philistinism in high places. It is the manifestation in higher education of the general fact that we live in a thoroughly rationalised society. We expect things to work reliably and when they do, it is because they have been standardised, barcoded, and systematised for economies of scale. There is no reason to expect higher education to escape the general condition of the society in which it takes place. In fact, university expansion happens only because we live in an age of credentialism and regulation. There are now few jobs where one can hope to be employed without formal qualifications of some sort, even if the qualifications have no direct bearing on the job in view. That is why something like 40% of the population in rich countries goes on to higher education. Without credentialism, neither governments nor parents would support students on anything like the same scale, even if 40% of young adults wanted to go to university for the sheer love of learning. Most of us have credentialism to thank for the students in our classes. But then a natural question arises: who certifies the certifiers? In an age where everything is tested for safety and quality, who shall check on the quality of higher education? Thus is called into being the apparatus of academic quality assurance. Academics naturally chafe against this apparatus and dream of a misty historic past when universities were not subject to interference from quangos and governments. No such past existed—religious and civic authorities have been banning books and cancelling academics since the first universities were founded. My main point, though, is that such musings can only be dreams, because without the culture of credentialism and regulation that gives rise to the academic quality assurance apparatus, most academics would have no students to

teach and indeed no university to work in. This is not to suggest that the academic quality assurance regime we have is beyond improvement.

In the final pages of *The Protestant Ethic*, Weber sums up his findings:

> The puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order… the care for external goods should only lie on the shoulders the saint "like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment." But fate degreed that the cloak should become an iron cage. (Weber 2007, 123)

The bars of the cage are both outside us and within. They are the systems around us for making, moving, tracking and trading goods and services, which now include the algorithms that present us with bits of culture to consume and collect data on us so that we become elements in the systems. The iron bars are also within us, in the form of more or less irreligious asceticisms. "The idea of duty in one's calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs." (Weber 2007, 124). The feeling that one ought to use one's time productively and the compulsion that calls academics to their laptops at weekends and in evenings are shapes of this ghost. In academia, one might have hoped for relief, for a walk round the prison yard in the sunshine of pure enquiry and learning for learning's sake. No such luck, of course. Competition for scarce academic jobs and the low pay those jobs initially offer ensure that young scholars live lives as frugal and laborious as any puritan could hope for. Meanwhile, systems for evaluating and optimising learning, teaching and research become more intrusive and effective in shaping the activities and the people. Are you investigating courtship practices among the middle classes of late medieval Flanders? We have systems to ensure that you do it faster and more efficiently. Are you writing about the value of poetry in the lives of schoolchildren? We have systems to ensure that you optimise the dissemination of your findings to end users and stakeholders. Nothing organised at scale escapes rationalisation. This rationalised way of doing and being is not the reversible choice of management or government. It is the latest stage of a process that reaches back to the first improvements in stone tools and fire-lighting technique.

It is, therefore, pointless to complain in absolute or general terms about the rise of administration, credentialism and rationalisation. The academic who does so, casting himself as a romantic hero who embodies the true values of the university and somehow stands like Friedrich's *Traveller* above the

grubby territory of instrumental reason, is in fact more like the bird that imagines it could fly faster if the air were not in the way.[4] That said, regulation and credentialism can be done better or worse, with varying levels of sensitivity to unintended consequences. There is no sense complaining about air resistance, but we can talk about air quality. One of the themes running through this book is my slow realisation that a central problem for educators is: how can education achieve its liberal and romantic aims in a rationalised institutional context? Weber gives us a good description of what the world is like, but he refuses to tell us how to live in it. He wrote a pair of essays describing specific varieties of professional ethics (*Science as a Vocation* and *Politics as a Vocation*), but they are only useful if you are already committed to science or politics. *Teaching as a Vocation* might have been an alternative title to this collection of published papers and blogposts.

The first chapter in this book started life as a contribution to a logic teaching conference, but its real origin lies in my experience as a masters student in Canada. I was a teaching assistant on the logic course, which included syllogistic logic. The students didn't have to memorise the names of valid syllogisms (Barbara, Celarent, Darii, Ferio, etc.) but they did have to learn the theory of distribution and how to convert and obvert categorical statements. This was all new to me because as an undergraduate I learned only modern mathematical logic. I asked the professor why, in 1989, philosophy students still had to learn this old stuff. He explained that he kept syllogistic in the course because it is the only fragment of the philosophy curriculum unchanged since medieval times. My curiosity about the place of logic in the undergraduate philosophy curriculum deepened when, in my first full-time academic job, I was given thirty-six lecture hours to fill with compulsory formal logic (twenty-four for the first-years, twelve for the second-years). I joyously gave them the good stuff, soundness and completeness, model theory, interpolation, the lot. A few students lapped it up, but the more common effect was unhappiness and on occasion, tears. Not wishing to cause unnecessary pain, I asked the head of department why formal logic was compulsory when most students were interested in political philosophy, existentialism, ethics and much else that does not require formal logic. Logic is compulsory for undergraduates, he explained, because the department must maintain its reputation for rigour in the professional philosophical community. A few years later, now at Hertfordshire,

[4] Metaphor borrowed from Kant (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A5/B9), who used it to make a different version of the point that the conditions of possibility of your activity can seem like hindrances. Karen François pointed me to this passage in Kant.

I had another opportunity to design a logic module for philosophy undergraduates. Determined not to repeat the error of pointlessly torturing humanities students with what is after all a branch of mathematics, I began to wonder whether the logic professor in Canada might have been on to something. I became persuaded that there are good reasons for including syllogistic in even the most modern philosophy curriculum, and in this paper I tried to set them out. Part of the argument introduces a theme that will recur, namely, paying attention to students' critical feelings about the curriculum material and using academic authority to validate them. Do you feel that material implication is a poor model of natural language if-then statements? You are not alone. Here are some experts who agree with you. Do you feel that some conditional statements have existential import? You are not alone, and here is a distinguished logician who has worked your gut reaction up into a model. Whether your gut reaction is true is another matter, but at least it is philosophically respectable.

The next paper, "Students are human beings (discuss)", was stimulated by technological progress. Around the turn of the century, the University of Hertfordshire built its own teaching intranet, called StudyNet. It was good for its time, better than the commercially available products. With it came a programme of training and staff engagement. Having demonstrated an interest in technology by creating some departmental webpages (in hard-coded HTML), I was appointed StudyNet Champion for the Faculty of Humanities, Law and Education, and added to the university's StudyNet learning and teaching strategy group. My role was to encourage lecturers to use the full potential of the technology, rather than just upload the handouts that they would have distributed anyway. The arrival of virtual learning environments like StudyNet is a good example of the general truth that you don't really know what you are doing until you try to computerise it. The challenge for lecturers was to reproduce our teacher-personae online, for asynchronous consumption. Before the arrival of the teaching intranet, it never mattered if the paper course-guide or handout was an unlovely or forbidding document, because the lecturer could wave it about, talk students through it, point out the vital information and generally supplement it with the personal touch. Uploading that course-guide for asynchronous use did not have the same effect. Somehow, we had to reproduce our classroom presence online. I noticed that the staff who had most difficulty with this were the natural-born teachers, the people who didn't have a distinct teacher-persona that they put on for work because teaching was just who they were and what they did. Those staff often had no idea what to do with their teaching intranet sites. In contrast, staff whose teacher-selves were

more deliberate performances had a much easier time creating sites that reflected and enhanced their classroom personae.

Helping lecturers make good use of the technology was one side of my StudyNet champion role. The other was to attend meetings of the central university group for thinking about how the technology would change pedagogy. These meetings had a revolutionary air. It seemed to have been agreed in advance that the teaching we did before the arrival of the technology was defective, and that these defects could be eradicated by blending digital technologies in to the mix. It was never stated exactly what the defects were, but this didn't seem to matter. Remarkably for a group that included engineers, it seemed we were setting out to solve problems without first defining them. I also learned that people in other disciplines than the humanities talk about teaching very differently. In the humanities, while it is acknowledged that teaching can be done well or badly, no one tries to make a science of it because it's too personal. Where one lecturer relies on charisma to charm students into studying harder than they might have otherwise done, another earns their trust by reliably showing kindness. Perhaps Dr A's lectures are unbearably dull, but the accompanying notes are very detailed, and you won't fail if you make good use of them. Dr B's lectures are lively and spontaneous because they're extemporised. You'll remember more far than you ever will from Dr A's monotone delivery, but be sure to write it down quickly because there are no notes provided. Attempting to persuade Drs A and B to adopt the best parts of each other's practice would be very bad manners and bring a world of pain upon the academic manager who tried. Meanwhile, in the university's Committee For The Propagation Of Pedagogical Revolution Through Technology, I learned that Chickering and Gamson have written down the final truth about pedagogy. I have every respect for Chickering and Gamson, and their seven principles are good advice. Everyone should read their (1987) article. I expect they'd be surprised to find their paper treated as holy writ and their seven principles printed on mugs. For someone coming from the teaching culture of idiosyncratic gentlemanly amateurism that prevailed in the humanities, it was shocking to find their list of seven top tips presented as undisputable knowledge. What was more upsetting was the emphasis on efficiency and automation of learning (I had not read Weber at this point). There was much discussion of re-designing assessments for machine marking, for example. This committee was also the first place where I met academic staff who use the language of academic quality assurance (learning outcomes, assessment landscape, etc.) unironically and apparently without resentment. The liberal and romantic aims of education that I assumed to be universal seemed to get short shrift. I kept wondering how a

machine could be programmed to credit a student for finding an original take on the material and supporting it with evidence and argument not lifted from the lectures or the supplied reading. To this day, I don't know whether the rest of the group did not share those aims, or whether something was happening similar to what I saw in the natural-born teachers in my own faculty. Perhaps those liberal and romantic aims are so deeply ingrained that they cannot easily be articulated and therefore give little resistance to the revolutionary technological optimism that seemed to have the upper hand. Either way, I felt moved to try to write them down, and this short piece is the result.

I wouldn't write it like this now. For one thing, I have mostly recovered from the shock of learning that other parts of the university think about pedagogy differently from us in the humanities. For another, my reading of Weber has given me a better understanding of why digital technologies seem to be part of a concerted onslaught against the values I associated with humanistic learning. This piece has a lapel-grabbing quality that I would now try to avoid. It presumes something of Nietzsche's madman shining a light at noon, a lone voice misunderstood by the market traders. I did feel a bit that way during meetings of the Committee For The Propagation Of Pedagogical Revolution Through Technology. Nobody else seemed to notice that we were simultaneously colluding in the triumph of instrumental rationality *and* doing instrumental rationality badly by looking for technological solutions to ill-defined problems.

In reality, the sentiments this piece expresses are nothing new, as its reference to churchy Victorians (Matthew Arnold and John Henry Newman) makes clear. Turning to the twentieth century, in *Right Ho, Jeeves* (Wodehouse 1934), a young aristocrat has to make a prize-day speech at a boys' secondary school and casts about for material. The omniscient butler Jeeves suggests that he

> …might mention to the young gentlemen that education is a drawing out, not a putting in. The late Lord Brancaster was much addicted to presenting prizes at schools, and he invariably employed this dictum.

I think we can be confident that Wodehouse was going for the comedy of recognition here. This and its variants ("education is lighting a fire, not filling a bucket", etc.) must have been tiresomely familiar clichés to veterans of school prize days in the 1930s. Some of the schools where real-life Lords Brancaster wheeled out such formulae might have been inspected in the previous century by Matthew Arnold. This raises another worry that I didn't think about enough at the time. In my effort to find ways of talking

about teaching and learning that express the liberal and romantic aims of education as I saw them, I found myself reaching for resources drawn from a privileged educational culture—the schools for children of the middle and upper classes of the British Empire. Churchy Victorians are good on education as drawing out and the development of the whole person. They are not so good on equality, diversity and inclusion, and very poor on decolonisation. Besides all this, I am now embarrassed by having exactly seven points in this article. I don't remember deliberately aping Chickering and Gamson's seven pillars of wisdom, but in any case if I were writing this now, I'd do it differently.

The most egregious part of this piece, though, is near the start, where I used a food-analogy. Aside from the cringe-y reference to a TV chef who may have fascinated the British public for too long, the analogy is unfair to students. It insinuates that they would choose an intellectual diet of pap were it not for the wise guidance of their tutors. This fails to respect the obvious fact that students who enrol on philosophy courses are already looking for and probably already consuming a wholesome intellectual diet. They arrive at university with philosophical interests, knowledge and appetites that this analogy shamefully disregards. Moreover, there is in this piece too much of Matthew Arnold's confidence that we curriculum-devisors can know what is the best that has been thought and said. Consumerism is a hopeless model for higher education, for a reason that has nothing to do with the superficial attractiveness of bad books or the deep wisdom of lecturers. It is simply that very few people take more than one undergraduate degree, and the real value of a degree course to the student is only apparent after it gets going, and perhaps only years after graduation. Consumerism depends on a picture in which consumers know from the start exactly what they want and can judge the value of the goods on offer at the time when they make the purchase. This works, if ever, only in markets where the consumer successively makes many similar purchases and builds up some experience and expertise. A university degree course is a big one-off purchase, the value of which is intangible, lies far in the future and may involve some shift in the tastes and values of the student. It is possible to make this point without awarding ourselves intellectual Michelin stars or insulting our students. Besides, what matters most is not that we give our students the best stuff to read, but rather that they are empowered to do good things with whatever they get. With those apologies in place, I still think this piece is on to something. I still think that, given a piece of educational theory or some pedagogical recommendations, it is a good critical question to ask what model of human beings they imply. Mechanism in pedagogy entails thinking of students as machines.

The third paper, "Feeling the Force of Argument", takes up and develops some of the more successful themes of the previous two. It is from a collection edited by Andrea Kenkmann (2009), who briefly taught at the University of Hertfordshire and permanently changed my thinking about teaching. Where the previous piece was driven by frustration, this was a joy to write. It was an opportunity to combine two of my favourites, George Pólya and Robin G. Collingwood, who both insist on the importance of the affective aspect of all language, including the most formal and mathematical. In a way this piece feels out-of-date because it was written before the appearance of emojis and memes of people vividly expressing emotions (woman laughing so hard she spits out her coffee, for example). The suggestion that all use of language has an emotive charge is not news to a culture in which a full stop at the end of a text message can be read as aggressively formal. I think the argument still works, though I probably wouldn't now write quite so confidently about what (all!) English-speaking philosophy is like. Philosophy was already changing in ways that I haven't kept track of. One thing I got dead wrong was this: "As philosophers, we would like to think about the business of teaching philosophy in philosophical terms. That is, we would like to think about teaching philosophy using resources drawn from philosophy itself, rather than having to borrow from psychology or educational theory." That is an accurate summary of a sentiment common to philosophers, so in that sense I was right. However, I failed to challenge it. This let-philosophy-fix-philosophy attitude is part of the reason why philosophy is failing to solve its own problems (dominance by white, middle-class men; alarming number of sexual harassment cases involving very senior figures; rigidity of canon; etc.). The historian of mathematics Michael Barany showed me that philosophy must look to other disciplines if it is to understand itself well enough to fix itself. I might have learned this from my own writing if I had read it more carefully. In this very piece, where I make that remark about philosophy's preference for self-sufficiency, I rely on a mathematician and a philosopher who was also an archaeologist. In the previous piece, I gravely noted that both crusading chefs and philosophers would have to "pay attention to the large social, political and economic structures" that create appetites and shape possibilities. Having said this, I didn't do anything of the sort but rather headed off into the more familiar and comfortable territory (for a philosopher) of scrutinising the use of language. I could see the need for a social scientific understanding of higher education, but I was not and still am not a social scientist.

The next paper, "Authoritarian vs Authoritative Teaching: Pólya and Lakatos", started as a talk given to a mathematics education conference in

Germany and is reprinted from a collection edited by Gila Hanna, Hans Niels Jahnke, and Helmut Pulte. This was my first in-person encounter with the world of mathematics education. It includes a longer treatment of Pólya's writing about the affective side of all intellectual life. Aside from that, writing this piece taught me two things that bear on other papers in this collection. First, researching the Hungarian tradition in mathematics teaching in the generation before Imre Lakatos showed me how bogus Lakatos's posturing as a prophet in the wilderness was. He was not a lone voice calling for necessary reform of a sclerotic system. He was essentially a conservative voice (in spite of his Trotskyist personality) calling for a return to Hungarian pedagogical tradition in mathematics. Rather than churchy Victorians, he had Sándor Karácsony, but he was making a backward-looking gesture similar to the noises I was making in the Committee For Pedagogical Revolution Through Technology. As will become apparent, my scepticism about philosophers (including my younger self) who present themselves as the embattled embodiment of liberal and romantic educational values was to grow. The second point is that students cannot model themselves on experienced professional researchers. This might seem obvious, but it is standard in philosophy to invite students to see themselves as researchers. We require students to use the apparatus of scholarly publication in their essays and to develop original critical opinions. That is what we ought to do, but thinking about Pólya made me consider what a tall order it is. He suggests that mathematics teachers prompt students with questions like, "Do you know of a simpler problem that may help you to solve the problem you're working on?" or "Do you know any related results?" These are useful heuristics for someone who has been collecting knowledge and experience for decades. For a mathematics student, the answer to either of these is unlikely to be "yes" unless they have been supplied with the helpful gadget by the teacher. It's the same in philosophy. I remember a colleague remarking that the hardest student question to answer is, "How do I raise my grade from a high upper second to a first?", because the answer is "Say something original" and there isn't a recipe for doing that.

That colleague was John Lippitt, and the next piece, "Wot U @ Uni 4?", is one of two pieces written jointly with him, reporting partly empirical work funded by the now defunded and defunct Subject Centre for Philosophy and Religious Studies. Here, we were at last attempting to supplement philosophy with social science, though at this point we didn't do anything so rash as to enlist the help of social scientists. The project grew out of a sense that academic staff don't know enough about why students go to university and what they hope for from it. We can of course try to remember

our teenage selves but we are outliers simply by being academic staff. The title is a piece of fogeyism that does a disservice to the articulate intelligence of the students who took part in our focus groups, but it does express the feeling we had that the world was changing too fast for us to understand. We were in our early forties, not especially old by academic standards but already separated from the students because our undergraduate years took place before the arrival of the internet. The focus groups produced some memorable moments that didn't quite make the research report. There was a sharp exchange between a student who valued lectures because they deliver the stuff in concentrated form but who hated seminars because they wasted her time by giving airtime to non-experts, and another who couldn't concentrate in lectures however hard he tried but who came alive in seminars and found himself learning. They were both surprised to find that their own experience was not universal. This was at a time when the higher education press was full of articles about the death of the traditional lecture. My all-time favourite was the mature student who, when asked why he came to university said, "I was a terrible electrician. I had to do something else before I burned somebody's house down."

From that project, we learned that many students think of study as a solitary activity. We got interested in the topic of critical friendships because we noticed that the most successful philosophy students often come in pairs or as part of a small group who took all the same modules and worked together. We applied for another small grant from the Philosophy and Religious Studies Subject Centre to survey the literature on peer-to-peer student support and talk to some year 12 and 13 students about studying with friends. This time, we hired an educational researcher, Kathryn Weston, to help us make sense of the world outside philosophy. We learned that the leaders in team-learning and peer support are mostly in professions like nursing and teaching. Trainee nurses learn in teams because nurses work in teams. Peer-to-peer mentoring is normal in teacher training. One of the main findings of "Wot U @ Uni 4?" was that the drastic fall in contact hours between school and university makes it hard for students to find study buddies, because they don't see enough of each other. We learned how important it is to create opportunities for students to find critical friends among their classmates, and we learned that educational practice in certain professions is the place to look for ideas about how to do that. However, the students taught us two reasons why trying to engineer in-class friendships cannot amount to a pedagogical strategy. One is that their solipsistic learning styles are deeply ingrained. They think that learning is an unavoidably individual activity because it's about earning the grades you deserve for your individual effort and achievement. One student confidently

announced that there cannot be an assessed group activity where everyone in the group gets the same grade, because that wouldn't be fair. We didn't tell him that we had been doing exactly that for over a decade. Solipsistic learning is so drilled into students that it cannot be easily overcome except in cases like nurse education where they are training to join a team-based profession. In the humanities, students are often bemused by or hostile to activities aimed at community-building and friendship-brokering, seeing no rationale for spending time with people that isn't directly related to learning stuff. I know this. I've tried.[5]

The other point the students made was the importance of roles in the giving and taking of criticism. If we want students to improve each other's work by criticising it, we must create roles in which they can do it without social risk and we must train them to it. When I took this point up and went in search of how-to guides for reviewers of academic articles, I found almost nothing in philosophy but some great material in computer science. Again, other disciplines are well ahead with cracking some of these problems. Philosophers cannot fix philosophy with philosophy alone.

The eighth paper, "Weber and Coyote: polytheism as a practical attitude", is where the question about pursuing liberal and romantic educational goals in a rationalised institutional context first crystalised. This piece was written in some dudgeon. In 2013, I spent a week on one of the smaller inhabited Orkney islands with eleven other academics, discussing ethics in professional training, with an emphasis on medicine and law. There were three medics, three law academics, and a mixed bag of humanities people (philosophers, theologians, a theatre director). It was great week. I learned a lot and spent time with some terrific people. The Orkneys are an extraordinary environment, and the archaeology is unsurpassed in the British Isles. It was a convivium, an experiment in living and thinking together. We ate, talked, presented, discussed, did some drama exercises, visited a prehistoric tomb, strolled the cliff tops and frolicked at the ceilidh. It worked—the walks and parlour games loosened us up and released our hinterlands into the discussions in a way that mightn't have happened at a conventional conference. I hope the six representatives of medical and legal

[5] Here, we meet a fine example of the rule that whatever is wrong with the students is worse in the staff. Solipsism is the rule for humanities scholars who write solo-authored papers and solo-teach modules of their own design. Years of this can produce a person who finds shared responsibility intolerable (I could be blamed for something someone else did!). Now, imagine what happens when this person is appointed to lead a small team.

education felt that the trip was worth their while, because it quickly became apparent that these two professions are way ahead of the humanities in thinking about how to encourage their graduates to be ethical professionals. Perhaps we humanists said something useful at some point, but my recollection is that for the most part, we sat and took notes while the lawyers and doctors compared their ways of doing things.

I recorded some of the positive lessons in the next chapter ("Virtues in the Classroom"). However, the discussions had a limitation that began to play on my mind and grate on my nerves. We were there to think about how to support the human, ethical element in professional training. Naturally, we considered the threats to it, but our analysis of these threats never went beyond banal fulminations against managerialism and neo-liberalism. Pronouncing these swear-words took on a ritual air that I recognised from other academic gatherings. I began to suspect that these performances were more about our asserting a certain identity than understanding the conditions in which we work. It relies on a flattering contrast, thus: if the managers and senior administrators of universities are agents of managerialism and neo-liberalism then we academics must be living embodiments of the precious values that these -isms threaten to crush. That doesn't follow logically, of course, but we can bridge the logical gap by performing the ritual fulminations. These may include some mention of Hannah Arendt's view that bureaucracy produces tyranny. That is especially flattering to academics, because it means that by grumbling about having to fill in some new form or master a new piece of office software, we are somehow standing up against fascism. A new administrative system may take a little of an academic's time while adding efficiency to the university overall. Since the academic's professional time is paid for by the university, it is up to the university to decide whether to use some of it learning a new administrative routine. Rather than recognising this dull fact, how much more satisfying it is to imagine oneself a *résistant*, fighting tyranny by returning the form late or not at all!

Saying this, I don't mean to imply that academics who fulminate against managerialism or neo-liberalism are insincere. Nor would I suggest that managerialism and neo-liberalism are not real or have no deleterious impact on higher education. Moreover, new administrative demands are not usually accompanied by a reduction in some other part of the workload. The demands on universities and the way they are managed have changed. In many universities, the Vice-Chancellor is effectively a chief executive (even in institutions where a professorial senate still has formal powers). Course content is now judged against measured market demand and the imagined

needs of business. All this is true, and there are academics who really know what these words ("managerialism" and "neo-liberalism") mean and use them seriously. They are the people who, having pronounced the swear-words, go on to use the concepts rigorously and apply them to their proper targets. It is certainly not the case that every staff-room speech about how managerialism and/or neo-liberalism are undermining the proper values and purpose of higher education is merely an identity-confirming ritual. Nevertheless, we do express something about ourselves when we talk about other things. It is healthy to listen for that and check that what we're saying about ourselves is true, or at least plausible and not insulting to others. That is the first part of my beef with this rhetoric. Complaining about routine admin in the same breath as managerialism and neo-liberalism, and wheeling out Arendt, is too flattering to academics and is gratuitously insulting to administrators and managers. All university employees, from the Vice Chancellor down, are trapped in Weber's iron cage.

The second part is that too often, a ritual fulmination against managerialism and neo-liberalism stops early, at the level of generalities. That's a clue that on this occasion it's more about identity-marking than understanding our professional predicament. Such performances rarely get as far as recommendations for action. I asked one of my colleagues at the Orkney convivium how he would ensure that the things he cares about survive and thrive, if he were the VC of a medium-sized university, using only the tools and resources normally available to VCs. His answer? "I wouldn't take that job."

As always, my frustration with others was hiding guilty knowledge about myself. At times, I have indulged in posing as an avatar of the real purpose of the university in the face of managerial and governmental philistinism. You can see some that in the earlier papers in this book. I'm sure I must have performed the identity-confirming ritual fulminations during meetings of the Committee For The Propagation Of Pedagogical Revolution Through Technology. There is a quotation from Feyerabend that I was fond of about the first duty of a philosophy being to criticise the administration, and the second being to criticise its own methods (Motterlini 1999, 385).[6] Yes, I

[6] In fact, by "administration" here Feyerabend meant the chair of his department and other academics who held local managerial roles. The surrounding argument is about how deeply the head of department misunderstood the real meaning of philosophy and the folly of treating philosophy as a special discipline with its own methods and results. It doesn't really connect with the discussion here. Nevertheless, I liked it

was frustrated that I'd travelled all the way to the Orkneys only to hear ritual denunciations and generalities that flattered the speaker without proper analysis or effective calls to action, but the point stung because I knew that I was no better and already guilty of the same.

I returned to the mainland convinced that the first duty of a philosopher tempted to moan about bureaucracy is to understand bureaucracy better, which led me to Weber. It was time to follow my own advice from years earlier and "pay attention to the large social, political and economic structures" that shape the world of higher education. Meanwhile, I enjoyed reading Lewis Hyde's book (2008) *Trickster Makes This World: how disruptive imagination creates culture.* This seemed to me to offer a way to articulate the spontaneous, unpredictable quality of education that Weberian rationalisation threatens without reaching back to Matthew Arnold, JH Newman, and Lord Brancaster. One never knows what the students will make of the curricular stuff, and that's a large part of the value of the exercise. Following Weber's lead, the argument moves between material and mytho-poetic planes. The rule for doing that rigorously is: whatever you gesture at by talking about gods and spirits must translate into mundane sociology. Some students pointed out that I don't always follow that rule, because there are arguments about what gods can know that don't translate onto the material plane. They weren't even my students, so it was especially generous of them to read my stuff and notice its logical holes.[7]

This paper may seem pessimistic, because it argues that rationalisation is here to stay and will only get more intense, and the best hope for freedom is to have some trickster spirit. There is a little more hope than that, for two reasons. One is that Weberian rationalisation is unavoidable for anything organised at scale, but education happens in small spaces, in classrooms, tutorials, student homework groups and solitary study (solipsism offers relief from rationalisation—you can organise your own notes as inefficiently as you like). These are spaces too small and numerous to police. The other source of hope, which I owe to reading Paul du Gay, is that bureaucracy and neo-liberalism are not in league with each other. They are in fact antithetical spirits. Where bureaucracy likes order, hierarchy, careful record-keeping,

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because it seemed to express the proper attitude of a humanities academic towards the agents of tick-box philistinism. That was a misreading on my part.

[7] They were at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, and their tutor was Dr Colin Rittberg. There is another point about practical polytheism that bothers me: if different parts of life are utterly compartmentalised, then it's hard to carry moral lessons from one to another.

and process, neo-liberalism likes disruption, cutting red tape, abolishing hierarchies, and payment by results. They are both much stronger and more aggressive deities than the household gods of academia, and their combat with each other tends to smash up the neighbourhood, but we can be confident that neither will achieve a final victory. To switch metaphors, the Viking earls of the Orkneys maintained a measure of independence by playing the kings of Scotland and Norway off against each other. It's a good trick if you are trickster enough to pull it off.

The next chapter is the text of an online talk I gave to a workshop organised by Jonathan Beale at the Tony Little Centre for Innovation and Research in Learning, based at Eton College. The title, "Virtues in the Classroom", refers to a project that I ran for a while with John Lippitt. Following our work on friendships among students, we got interested in whether and how academic philosophers teach the intellectual virtues—or any virtues at all. This came from several sources. One was that, in common with most universities, the University of Hertfordshire aspires to inculcate "graduate attributes" in its students. Most of these attributes are valuable dispositions of character, in other words, virtues. The university takes care to frame this effort in language that doesn't sound pious or moralising, but ultimately, it commits us to teaching virtues. The other source was John's research into particular virtues (in contrast to writing up virtue ethics as a general ethical theory). Meanwhile, professional philosophy was having a crisis of conscience about the boorish behaviour too often found in research seminars. This led us to think about the virtues that philosophers imagine themselves to be modelling and the characteristics that students see in the same performances. We set up a blog (manifestvirtue.wordpress.com) to collect contributions on this and related topics. This talk to the Tony Little Centre was a loose bag of ideas gathered either from the Orkney convivium or from the Manifest Virtue blog. As before, the overall message is that philosophy cannot solve its own problems. It needs to look elsewhere, to professional training, to sociology, to educational studies.

The next paper was a collaboration with a postgraduate student in philosophy, Jo Ahlberg, and funded by the University of Hertfordshire Learning and Teaching Innovation Centre. Like all UK universities, UH has a BAME awarding gap. The senior university staff tasked with closing that gap are, almost exclusively, white. Some input from non-white students is essential. On the other hand, it is not reasonable to ask students to come up with policies to drive change on their own. We tried to bridge that chasm by using a citizens' assembly approach. We gathered a group of non-white students and gave them the same information, statistics and theory that the university