



Kagisano Number 9

Smile

THE AIMS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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A DILEMMA ABOUT THE FINAL ENDS OF HIGHER EDUCATION - AND A RESOLUTION

*Thaddeus Metz
University of Johannesburg*

Introduction

It turns out to be exceedingly difficult to pinpoint what academics at public universities ought to be paid to do with their time. Of course they should be discovering and disseminating knowledge, but the tricky question is: which knowledge? It would be of interest to have a solid answer to this question, i.e., one that is comprehensive and makes good sense of comparatively uncontroversial judgements that most readers share about the matter. However, current theoretical reflection faces a dilemma about the proper aims of lecturers at state higher education institutions.

On the one hand, all dominant theories of how justly to spend public resources entail that academics should not pursue 'knowledge for its own sake' and should rather strictly devote their energies toward promoting some concrete public good such as development, justice or autonomy. After all, if the public is footing the bill, it makes sense that it should receive something it has authorized or that is at least of some concern to it.

On the other hand, this view of the academic enterprise entails the absurdity that some of the intuitively most important and interesting projects in the humanities and the sciences are inappropriate. For just two examples, if knowledge for its own sake were wrong for academics to pursue and to transmit, then it would not be permissible for them to enquire into syntactic theories of Shakespeare's writings or the ultimate fate of the universe, viz., whether it will expand forever or not.

In this article, I spell out this dilemma, and then suggest a new, promising way to resolve it. My strategy is to retain the idea that academics not merely may, but positively should, seek out certain kinds of knowledge for its own

sake, and to articulate a new theory of how state resources ought to be used that can accommodate that intuition. Specifically, I show that the dilemma can be resolved if the point of the state and its public institutions ought to be to balance the realization of final goods. I do not have the space to determine whether this account of the state's proper ends is independently attractive or not, something that must be undertaken in other work in order ultimately to determine whether the strategy I proffer is successful.

'Knowledge for its own sake'

The question I seek to answer is what the final ends of a public university ought to be, and, in particular, whether the discovery and transmission of knowledge for its own sake is among them. By the latter I mean intellectual activity that is very unlikely to realize a concrete public benefit such as economic development, social justice or individual autonomy to any substantial degree, or that is the least likely to do so relative to other kinds of reflection that academics could promote.

Notice, then, that I do not take the phrase 'knowledge for its own sake' literally, in two respects. First, it need not be knowledge, viz., warranted true belief, but rather a cognitive viewpoint that is, say, merely justified at a given time, but that could turn out to be false. Furthermore, it need not strictly speaking be enquiry for its own sake, but rather reflection undertaken for some aim other than one that is likely to realize a tangible social good such as Constitutional democracy, reduced poverty or the like.

Some, including Malegapuru Makgoba, have argued that the concept of knowledge for its own sake is incoherent and inapplicable (e.g., Makgoba 1998; Nabudere 2006: 7-8), but I have replied that he and those with similar views are taking the phrase too literally (Metz 2009a: 519-521). Instead of rejecting the concept based on a cramped reading of the words involved, the phrase should be used as a placeholder to facilitate debate about whether it is morally right for public academic institutions to pursue intellectual activity of a sort that is unlikely to contribute to society in terms of wealth, health, rights, self-governance or some similar benefit that is not 'free-floating'.

Key examples, then, of knowledge for its own sake, beyond the form of Shakespeare and the fate of the universe, include: 'Is there a black hole at the centre of every galaxy?', 'Is there intelligent life on other planets?', 'What is the ontological status of numbers?', 'Is scepticism refutable, e.g., can you know you are not dreaming right now?', 'How did fish evolve into terrestrial creatures?' and 'What killed the dinosaurs?'

As these examples indicate, it is not merely the humanities that would be affected by the claim that it is wrong for public higher education to pursue knowledge for its own sake, which contemporary debates often assume; vide titles such as Stanley Fish's essay 'The Uses of the Humanities' (2008), Martha Nussbaum's book *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (2010) and, locally, John Higgins' 'Dilemma of the Humanities' (2011). Many pursuits currently far from the fringes in physics and biology would also be impermissible, if that claim were true.

Reasons to favour the down-to-earth over the blue-sky

Elsewhere, I have argued that what is currently the most developed thinking about whether a state university may promote knowledge for its own sake faces a dilemma between what I call 'macro' and 'micro' perspectives (Metz 2010). In the next two sections, I draw on this work to recount key aspects of the antinomy, after which I make a new suggestion about what I take to be the most promising way to resolve it.

Here, I focus on the 'macro' perspective of the way the state ought to deploy its resources, contending that all the dominant theories entail that the state ought to do so on behalf of the public in ways that appear to rule out knowledge for its own sake. To make this claim plausible, I show that four major theories of the proper ends of public institutions underwrite the claim that academics at them ought merely to pursue enquiry of the sort that would be likely to have some practical payoff.

Cost-Benefit Analysis

I begin by addressing a cost-benefit, or what philosophers call a 'utilitarian', account of proper state goals, according to which the state ought to spend public resources just insofar as doing so is expected, relative to other available options, to result in the highest net improvement to people's quality of life in the long run. So stated, this view begs the question of what counts an improved quality of life, but one need not be very specific about that, and need merely accept that it involves something akin to feeling pleasure instead of pain, satisfying desires instead of having them frustrated, and actualizing certain capabilities such as health, education and autonomy and avoiding correlative bads such as sickness, ignorance and slavishness.

It appears almost true by definition that a cost-benefit approach to the state would rule out seeking knowledge for its own sake, since the latter is defined as that which is unlikely to foster concrete social goods such as an improved quality of life. And, indeed, some South African educational theorists have made that point, invoking a cost-benefit analysis in defence of strictly 'relevant' or 'responsive' instruction. Dolina Dowling and Siphon Seepe approvingly cite one of the earliest and clearest Africanist statements against knowledge for its own sake from TM Yesufu:

[T]he African university must not pursue knowledge for its own sake, 'but for the sake of, and the amelioration of the conditions of life and work of, the ordinary man and woman'. It must be fully committed to active participation in the social transformation, economic modernisation, and the training and upgrading of the total human resources of the nation.

(Dowling and Seepe 2003: 45-48).

Concretely, discovering the fate of the universe or syntactic patterns in Shakespeare and then reporting the findings to others would produce much less expected social well-being than other types of knowledge that a university academic in general could produce.

Although I disagree that a public university, whether in Africa or not, must be 'fully'¹ committed to improving people's quality of life in the ways Yesufu, Dowling and Seepe have in mind, I agree with them that a cost-benefit approach to state resources entails that it should be. Interestingly, there have been some, notably from a South African context, who have tried to argue, in two ways, that a cost-benefit approach to public institutions in fact permits the promotion of knowledge for its own sake at a state university. It should be revealing for me to explain why they are incorrect.

First, there are some who have pointed out that we can never really know for sure what the long-term effects of knowledge will be,² and from this have concluded that academics ought at least to be free to pursue whatever knowledge they want, and do not act wrongly thereby. For example, in an eloquent and insightful report commissioned by South Africa's Council on Higher Education (CHE), Ruth Jonathan appeals to:

the truism that the future cannot be predicted, perhaps most obviously regarding the directions that the development of knowledge and technology will take. Thus even within the natural sciences, physical and biological, in technology studies and in business administration, there could be no sound rationale for steering teaching in line with too tight a specification of relevance. There would be even less justification for so prioritising research, as most of the innovations making today's world what it is have taken even their originators by surprise.

(Jonathan 2006: 21).³

Even if an instance of knowledge appears to be merely free-floating, chances are that its enquirer is on terra firma, so the argument goes.

The trouble with this rationale is that the alleged truism is patently false (Metz 2010: 541-543). Although it is correct that we cannot predict outcomes with certainty, we can and must do so on the basis of probability.

¹ Though it of course should be partially, indeed largely, so committed.

² In effect denying that there is any 'knowledge for its own sake' as I have defined it, viz., as reflection that, for all we know, is unlikely to have any tangibly desirable social impact.

³ See also Makgoba 1998: 47 and Higgins 2000: 116.

In a situation in which there are scarce resources, the rational thing to do from the perspective of a cost-benefit approach is nothing other than to weigh up the expected values and disvalues and to choose the option that will maximize the net amount of expected value minus expected disvalue. And often we are in a position to have some estimation of which knowledge is more likely to benefit society compared with other knowledge, even if we cannot specify the probabilities in absolute terms. After all, a physicist seeking to discover the fate of the universe is much less likely to improve social well-being than is one working to develop solar power. It would be irrational, from the standpoint of wanting to improve people's lives, merely to flip a coin about which project to fund, supposing a state university were a utilitarian agent having to choose where to put its money.

Here is a second strategy some have used to attempt to show that utilitarianism can permit the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Articulated with most care in the South African context by John Higgins in an influential essay (2000), this rationale is that even if blue-sky knowledge would not be likely to do much good for society, the blue-sky knower would be. Citing the views of the British thinker Conrad Russell, Higgins remarks that 'the real value of the university lies in part with the teaching it does and the graduates it produces, graduates who "must be capable of wanting to pursue knowledge for its own sake" if they are to be socially useful' (Higgins 2000: 116). Why? Because those who pursue knowledge for its own sake come to prize the truth and to speak it more often than those who pursue other kinds of knowledge, where the more truth-appreciators a society has, the better off it is likely to be in the long-term.

This is a clever manoeuvre by which to try to demonstrate that pursuing knowledge for its own sake can be of long-term social benefit. However, I think it also clearly fails in its aims. If the core premise of the argument, that blue-sky enquirers are more faithful to the truth and willing to speak it to power than more practical scholars, were correct, then philosophers and cosmological physicists would be, on average, better in these respects than, say, sociologists and medical researchers. However, I am, and I presume the reader is, unaware of any evidence suggesting that is the case. So far as truth-appreciation goes, these scholars are all on a par with one another.

In addition, a plausible reason for doubting that blue-sky enquiry makes one a better truth-appreciator is that the aspects of blue-sky enquiry that foster an appreciation of truth are equally (or at least comparably) available when conducting more practically relevant enquiry. For example, take a physicist working on solar power. She could appreciate the non-utilitarian facets of her research, e.g., the symmetry of the physics underlying the work, or the elegance of the theorems she uses, and thereby become a useful truth-appreciator, while also discovering knowledge that is likely to make a real difference to the general welfare. Higgins' rationale, therefore, entails not that researchers should engage in blue-sky enquiry, but rather that they should engage in practical enquiry but along the way appreciate its non-practical facets, so as additionally to become truth-appreciators (cf. Graham 2008: 32-33). Such research and researchers are what would be the most utilitarian.

Majoritarian Will

Consider now, a different account of how state resources ought to be spent, one that appeals not to what would improve the majority's life, but rather what the majority most wants or has authorized. According to this democratic will, or 'social choice', theory of public institutions, they ought to deploy their resources in ways that comport either with what a majority has approved of via fair procedures, or what it would approve of, were it to be consulted. South African theorists whose views come close to such a perspective again include Seepe (1998), Dowling and Seepe (2003: 44-45) as well as Steven Friedman and Omano Edigheji (2006: 9-17). Dowling and Seepe provide a clear-cut expression of this view:

A democratic society is expected to justify its investment in education. Thus, the question arises: what return does the country derive from its investment in higher education?... In short, there is a growing public expectation that universities should contribute to the economic, social and cultural development of society... (T)he traditional notion of the academic, with its emphasis on personal growth, implied that s/he worked in isolation from, or at least failed adequately to participate in, the wider life of society. Yet the very

expertise and skills that academics have are desperately needed by society. Furthermore, as academics are paid from the public purse, society is correct to expect some return from this investment.

(Dowling and Seepe 2003: 45).

In short, the thesis that institutions supported with public funds ought to deploy them for goals of which the public approves, combined with the plausible suggestion that the goals for state universities of which the public approves are solely to enhance economic and other forms of well-being, entails that it would be inappropriate for academics at such places to pursue knowledge for its own sake.

Of course, there are probably majorities in some societies who want publicly-funded academics to pursue knowledge for its own sake. I notice that often the most widely-read news articles on the BBC's website are those relating to cosmology, which suggests that a poll of British people might go in favour of blue-sky enquiry. However, that is very unlikely to be true of all societies, particularly those in sub-Saharan Africa, where the salient values among black peoples tend to be more pragmatic (on which see Metz 2009a, 2009b).

In addition, even if an appeal to majoritarian will could entail that academics at public universities should pursue some blue-sky enquiry, it would not plausibly explain why they should. Suppose a cosmologist were to make a major discovery about the fate of the universe. It would not be suitable to praise her merely, or even primarily, for having fulfilled one of the majority's aspirations. Instead, there is something about the object of her enquiry, viz., what she has discovered, that explains why she should have undertaken it and should be praised for having done so. A similar criticism applies to the utilitarian rationale above; it would be inappropriate to praise this cosmologist simply for having done something that is likely to foster goods such as health, wealth, autonomy or the like, even if, per impossible, one could specify exactly how it would do so (on which see Metz 2010: 543).

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Constitutional Obligations

The same problem faces the third major theory of the state's proper ends, the view that it is not merely carrying out democratic will that matters, but rather realizing Constitutional norms, or perhaps social justice more generally, that does. From this perspective, the state ought to spend public monies and other resources just insofar as doing so would help to satisfy Constitutional imperatives such as widening political participation, upholding the rule of law, preventing crime, improving access to healthcare and housing and so on. South Africans who have expressed such a perspective include Penny Enslin and Kai Horsthemke (2004) and Vierle Dieltens (2008), who defend a liberal political and educational philosophy. Such a view is also present in some of the documents published by the CHE (e.g., 2008), which can be read as appealing to the Constitution to serve as common ground on contentious matters in South Africa.

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that discoveries about the fate of the universe or pattern in Shakespeare happened to prompt people to fulfil their Constitutional obligations; it would nonetheless be odd to value these findings for that reason. Again, there is something about these discoveries 'in themselves', apart from their consequences for social justice or similar goods, that makes them worthy of public funding and appreciation. Furthermore, this supposition is implausible; that is, it is extraordinarily unlikely that reflection about the ultimate direction of the universe or the structure of Shakespeare would do much in terms of helping to promote social justice, whether conceived in Constitutional terms or otherwise. So, if the state's resources were rightly deployed only insofar as they were likely to realize Constitutional imperatives, then it would be wrong for academics at public universities to reflect on such matters.

Human Excellences

The fourth, and last, theory of the proper ends of the state that I consider in this article is on the face of it more likely than the other three to be consistent with academic blue-sky enquiry. It is known as a 'perfectionist' account in philosophical lingo (Hurka 1993), the basic idea being that the state should seek to 'perfect', i.e., to develop, what is valuable about human

nature. The state ought to spend public resources just insofar as doing so produces intellectual and practical virtues, and reduces corresponding vices, among its residents.

Applying this principle with care would require a full account of what human excellences and their opposites are, but I need not provide that in order to evaluate the principle's likely implications for knowledge for its own sake. What is crucial to grasp is the distinction between welfarist values, associated with utilitarianism, and perfectionist ones. There are important differences between self-interest and self-realization, between benefits and accomplishments, between well-being and virtue, between what is good for a person and what a good person is, between when a person is well off and what a person does well. Athletes and artists are exemplars of human excellence, but need not be, and rarely are, characterized as being particularly happy.

The same is true for academics. It is fair to contend that the acquisition of certain kinds of knowledge is a human excellence, something valuable about us that animals cannot exemplify, meaning that the present theory appears to have a decent chance of underwriting the judgement that it is permissible for lecturers to promote knowledge for its own sake. It was, in fact, this kind of perspective on the role of higher education that motivated John Henry Newman, who inaugurated Western debate about 'the idea of the university' (1852), to support the claim that one of its aims should be to transmit⁴ knowledge for its own sake. A perfectionist account of the state, in sum, appears able to avoid the two kinds of objections made to the other three theories; pursuit of certain kinds of knowledge for its own sake does appear to be likely to realize a human excellence, and the realization of human excellence does appear to be a suitable reason to prize certain kinds of knowledge for its own sake.

I cannot recall having encountered anyone in a South African context appealing precisely to a perfectionist account of the state, perhaps because it is a characteristically Aristotelian and classically European view (in addition to Newman see, for example, Husserl 1935). That said, there is

⁴ But, interestingly, not to discover it.

of course a South African Marxist tradition, and it would fit neatly in that intellectual vein to think that the basic role of public institutions should be to develop valuable human capacities, which are stunted by poverty and more generally by dispossession of the means of production. In addition, many South African educationists find Martha Nussbaum's and Amartya Sen's capabilities approach to justice attractive, which approach is a close relative of perfectionism (e.g., Walker and Unterhalter 2010).

I lack the space to give this account of the state's proper ends the attention it deserves, but do highlight two major reasons for doubting that it can in fact permit the promotion of knowledge for its own sake, at least in ways that are intuitively apt.⁵ First, this principle provides little or no reason to discover knowledge for its own sake; instead, as I have noted elsewhere, spreading among students and the broader public the blue-sky knowledge that already exists would be sufficient to promote the excellence (Metz 2009a: 528). If what is good about us, what makes us better people, is actualizing our capacity to reflect on or apprehend certain matters, then that can be achieved without finding any new such things to think about.

The second problem with deeming perfectionism to be consistent with the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake at public universities is a matter of the lack of 'bang for the buck'. Relatively few members of the public, or even undergraduates and Honours students, are interested in, or even capable of truly understanding, knowledge for its own sake of the sort that is prized by specialists, which means that, to maximize the spread of human excellences, a state university ought to focus on imparting other sorts (Metz 2009a: 528, 534). If the proper aim of the state were to produce as much virtue and to reduce as much vice as it can, then it would be irrational to fund rarefied and expensive enquiries into the fate of the spatio-temporal world or the syntax of one of the world's best writers, which could be appreciated only by a small handful. Instead, a state university ought to devote these resources toward developing students' abilities to think critically or to become good citizens, or satisfying the public's interest in knowledge it can grasp and is willing to learn.

⁵ Elsewhere I intend to follow up on several hunches I have for doubting that knowledge for its own sake is a human excellence.

There are theories of just state goals besides the four I have examined, of course. However, the first three have been the dominant players in the South African context, the fourth is the most promising as a way to underwrite blue-sky enquiry, and the remaining theories are far less likely to succeed in that, for example, apprehending patterns in Shakespeare is unlikely to protect anyone's rights to non-interference (as per libertarianism), to foster communal relationships (communitarianism) or to fulfil a goal that rational agents living in a non-state society would expect to be fulfilled by erecting a state in the first place (contractualism).

Pruning the tree of knowledge

So far, I have spelled out the first horn of the dilemma about the final ends of state-sponsored higher education, that from the 'macro' perspective of the dominant theories of the proper aims of the state, academics may not pursue knowledge for its own sake. In this section, I articulate the second horn, which is that such a proposition is absurd. From the 'micro' perspective of those of us who make up a state university, it is wildly counterintuitive to think we must study and instruct only matters that are likely to have some concrete outcome.

Consider the cosmologist again. Suppose that, using a public university's resources, she ended up discovering that the universe will in fact expand forever, as opposed to collapsing back into a singularity or fizzling out into stasis. If the pursuit of such knowledge were impermissible, then she should feel guilty for what she has done, for she has misused public resources. In addition, she, and at least the line manager who authorized her to undertake this research, ought to apologize and to pay the public back for the misdirected funds. Still more, it would be objectionable for the university to celebrate what the cosmologist has discovered, given the wrongful means by which she did so. Finally, she and her line manager should be subject to disciplinary procedures for having wasted university time, money and lab equipment on work unrelated to its mission statement.

Similar reactions would apply to scholars who, say, figure out why Immanuel Kant believed that experience is possible only if the mind structures it, prove that we can never refute scepticism, determine precisely how sea-based creatures evolved onto land, show that ontogeny does indeed recapitulate phylogeny, or find decisive evidence of rational life elsewhere in the universe. Indeed, the same would apply to me for having written this article.

I presume the reader joins me in finding these implications preposterous. To be sure, having determined that few of us are willing to let go of the idea that some blue-sky enquiry is appropriate for an academic is not to have explained why we ought to retain the idea. I do not provide a full explanation of why in this article, but do, in the next section, indicate a promising rationale that is worth taking seriously and developing elsewhere by political theorists and philosophers of education.

A promising resolution of the dilemma

On the one hand, nearly all those working in an academic environment share the firm, considered judgement that it can be not merely permissible, but also praiseworthy for lecturers at publicly funded institutions of higher education to discover and to transmit some knowledge for its own sake, viz., beliefs or views that are comparatively unlikely to improve society with regard to justice, democracy, well-being, autonomy or the like. On the other hand, there presently exists no theory of the point of the state and its public institutions that can underwrite this judgement; all the salient views in the literature of what the state ought to be striving to achieve for its residents have the ultimate implication that academics may not pursue knowledge for its own sake. That is the dilemma.

Strategies for Resolving the Dilemma

One way to resolve the dilemma would be to 'bite the bullet' and give up the intuition that knowledge for its own sake is permissible at state universities. And I have encountered some Africanist scholars in the literature who appear willing to do that (Murove and Mazibuko 2008: 106). One wonders whether they appreciate the full ramifications of this view, i.e., just how much of the humanities and natural sciences would need to be cut away.

Regardless of whether they would change their minds or not, when a large majority of the most thoughtful enquirers on a given matter are confident of a belief, one has some weighty justification for holding that belief. The belief is not necessarily true, of course, for majorities of the best informed can be incorrect. However, if it is reasonable for me to believe that the sun is 93 million miles away from the earth because that is the firm consensus among those who have most studied the matter, it is similarly reasonable for me to believe that, say, I am permitted to compose this article despite its slim chance of improving South African society, because that is the firm consensus among those who have most thought about what academics ought to be doing at state universities.⁶

Therefore, I seek to resolve the dilemma in the other possible way, by rejecting the dominant theories of the proper final ends of the state and presenting a new one that permits the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake at a public university. In order conclusively to resolve the dilemma, I would have to demonstrate that this alternative view of the point of the state is independently attractive, i.e., warranted beyond its ability to underwrite knowledge for its own sake. I do not have the space to undertake that project here. Instead, what I do is articulate a *prima facie* attractive theory of the ultimate aims of public institutions and show that it makes decent sense of why lecturers at them should sometimes seek blue-sky knowledge.

How to resolve the dilemma (probably)

Here is a plausible principle about which ends the state ought to realize that promises to account for the judgement that lecturers may discover and transmit certain kinds of knowledge for its own sake: the state ought to spend public resources if, and only if, doing so is expected to balance the superlative realization of final goods. I explain this principle, indicate the way it would resolve the dilemma, and then, afterward, conclude the article by pointing to work that must be done elsewhere in order to have reason to think that the dilemma has been overcome.

⁶ True, it has been mostly academics who have thought about what academics ought to be doing — but who else would be in a position to do so with care?

A final good is something that is valuable 'in itself' in the sense of being desirable not merely as a means to something else. Money is desirable, but is not a final good, for one invariably desires money merely as a means to acquiring to something else on a market, say, something that will give one satisfaction. Indeed, pleasure is the most often cited clear instance of a final good among philosophers, and much of the debate among them is about whether there is anything else besides pleasure that is finally good. Most in the field these days believe that there is; it is common to maintain that a person, a creative work,⁷ or a loving, friendly or communal relationship can be good for its own sake, i.e., apart from what else it might bring about in the long run.

One might wonder what the difference is between a human excellence and a final good. Any human excellence or virtue is most likely a final good, but it is very unlikely that all final goods are human excellences. After all, neither the experience of pleasure, nor the bare existence of a person, is a virtue. And, yet, pleasure is worth promoting and persons merit respecting, because these are conditions that are valuable in themselves, and not solely as a tool to the production of something else.

The principle above says that the state ought to strive to realize final goods in a 'superlative' way, meaning that the most important final goods (considered by pair-wise comparison) should be promoted to an outstanding degree (considered in themselves). Intuitively, some final goods are better than others, e.g., a Picasso (or seeing it), a state of health and a good marriage are worth more than, say, the pleasure of eating a bowl of ice-cream. There is pro tanto reason for the state to focus its attention on the more highly ranked goods, and to promote them as much as it can.

This reason obtains, however, only on condition that the distribution of final goods is 'balanced'. Notions of balancing are familiar outside of a political context, but have yet to be developed in it, something I begin here. For example, when distributing goods such as time, attention and money in a family, one would not be right to give all of them to the most talented members so that they can maximally flourish, leaving the least talented

⁷ Or the experience of it, which might not be pleasant.

behind. Neither should one parcel out resources in a strictly equal manner among family members, nor should one give all the resources to the ones who are worst off, particularly if they are handicapped so that there would be nothing left for those able to flourish at a higher level. Instead, it would be reasonable to spend more on the child capable of playing the piano, but to ensure that the handicapped child, or the one capable merely of board games, is not left out in the cold. Intuitively, in the context of a family, then, final goods should be promoted so that no one is utterly disregarded or so that all receive some substantial consideration (cf. Slote 2001: 63-76), viz., distributed in a balanced way.

Consider, now, the idea of the state balancing a distribution of final goods in its territory. Such a state would do what it could to promote conditions highly valuable for their own sake, while ensuring that all final goods, even those with the least value, were realized to some degree. Such an account of the state's proper ends can entail and plausibly explain why lecturers at a public university ought to promote knowledge for its own sake. It is reasonable to suppose that certain kinds of knowledge for its own sake are finally good. It is not important for there to be reflection on how many redheads there are in a certain city (cf. Hurka 1993: 100, 115), but it is important to study the ultimate fate of the universe or to apprehend the syntactic structure of the works of *The Bard*.⁸ If some sorts of blue-sky enquiry were indeed good for their own sake, regardless of whether they produce anything valuable apart from themselves, then the present principle would direct the state to ensure that an adequate degree of them are realized, no matter how highly or lowly ranked they are relative to other final goods.

In sum, the category of final goods has a respectable philosophical pedigree, and plausibly captures the sort of knowledge for its own sake worth promoting, along with other conditions that the state ought to realize, such as a population free from sickness, injury and fear and able to engage in creative work and to sustain cohesive relationships. And the idea of distributing final goods in a balanced way, familiar from at least a familial context, is a plausible, even if under-theorized, way to allocate public resources.

⁸ I realize I need to develop elsewhere an account of why these topics in themselves merit study, but, for now, the judgement that they do will suffice.

Conclusion

I have argued that current thought about the proper aims of academics at a publicly-funded university faces a dilemma. On the one hand, most of us judge that it can be right, and even praiseworthy, for such academics to pursue some knowledge that is not expected to have any notable concrete social benefits, but, on the other hand, none of the dominant theories of the proper aims of the state can make sense of that judgement. To resolve the dilemma, I have proposed retaining the first horn, viz., not giving up the intuition that it can be appropriate for a scholar, say, to ascertain the fate of the universe on the public's dime. Instead, I have suggested a novel theory of how to use public resources, which plausibly accounts for the intuition.

According to this theory, the state is obligated to spend public resources in ways that would balance the superlative realization of final goods. Supposing that certain kinds of knowledge for their own sake are finally good, and supposing that the balancing theory has independent justification, viz., can underwrite additional firm intuitions about the proper ends of the state, then the dilemma is resolved. However, elsewhere scholars should explore whether these suppositions are indeed correct — but only if blue-sky enquiry is indeed permissible for us!⁹



Smile

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