

**Talking together, talking to ourselves:
Socrates and the crisis of the universities**

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[This is a text of a Valedictory lecture, delivered on 19th May 2014, with some footnotes to amplify individual points. I plan an extended printed version in the near future].

Disavowal: The views contained herein are my own (except where otherwise attributed); in what follows I do not express the views of King's College London, nor seek to represent them.

1. We are in trouble, our educational system and our universities a long way up the creek. In trying to craft a paddle, I start, as always, with Plato. His character Socrates insists that learning is done through conversation, relentless question and answer, often to the bewilderment or fury of everyone around. Today I bring Plato into a debate that his Socrates began: a debate about the nature, the value and the institutionalization of learning. For this lies at the heart, I believe, of what the self-serving higher education policies of successive governments have sought to destroy, sometimes perhaps in ignorance of what they are doing, sometimes in the grip of pernicious ideology.¹

¹ Student loans acknowledged to exceed 45% resource accounting and budgeting (RAB) charge March 2014

<http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/mar/21/student-fees-policy-costing-more> Compare Andrew McGettigan *The Great University Gamble* (2013)

Pt 4.; The Browne Report: Stefan Collini *LRB* November 2010

<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v32/n21/stefan-collini/brownes-gamble>

Looking to America: see Howard Hotson *LRB* May 2011

<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n10/howard-hotson/dont-look-to-the-ivy-league>

Thomas Docherty: *For the University: Democracy and the future of the institution* (2011); Martin McQuillan April 2011 <http://theoryculturesociety.org/martin->

Socrates goes about his business -- in the street, in the gym, on his way to court.² He meets his fellow citizens, asks them what they are doing, and what they think about it. He is eager to learn because – he says – he knows nothing; he hopes that his interlocutor will teach him.³ But often both of them end up completely flummoxed. No-one seems to know anything much; some are worried, some are furious, some couldn't care less. Socrates keeps on going, more questions on more occasions; but the pattern is general.⁴ It is sometimes hard to see how this kind of thing could ever be a model for much, apart from a kind of dismal skepticism – hard to see therefore why on earth, apart from long obstinacy, I would go back to Socrates now for my valedictory words.

Of course, the character I am talking about is a fiction of Plato's, a construct who enlivens the dialogues and often infuriates Plato's readers. This character claims to perform not only a good for his friends, but a great service to the state: the gadfly of the Athenians,⁵ the one true politician.⁶ He confers, then, a public good – the good of allowing the Athenians to understand how much they fail to know; to develop critical reflection of what they think and do; to make dissent possible and politically functional. For this, the historical Socrates was executed by poison in 399 BC. The barbarians were at the gates then. As we defend ourselves against them now, we might think how Plato uses his characters to consider why these conversations matter so much – so much as to provoke the ultimate reply from the state. You may wonder how close we are now to allowing

[mcquillan-on-higher-education-policy-in-the-uk/](#) Roger Brown with Helen Caruso: *Everything for Sale: the marketization of UK Higher Education* (2013).

² See e.g. Plato *Symposium* 174a; *Charmides* 153b; *Laches* 178a-b.

³ The oracle says that no-one is wiser than Socrates; Socrates responds: 'What does the god mean? For I recognise myself to be wise in neither a small thing nor a large one.' *Apology* 21b, with further discussion 21c-23b; compare *Charmides* 165b-166; *Meno* 80; *Theaetetus* 150 (midwifery).

⁴ E.g. *Charmides* 159 ff. ; and going wrong at *Euthydemus* 275-8; compare the failure of the written word, *Phaedrus* 275.

⁵ *Apology* 30e.

⁶ *Gorgias* 521.

to be silenced those who, like Socrates, seek to follow the argument where it leads.⁷

Plato's Socrates shows us, not how to teach -- for Socrates never claims to do that -- but how to learn. He shows us what is of deep value in learning – not so much in learning a skill or in acquiring a body of knowledge, but in learning what it is to engage in inquiry, to pursue it with clarity and integrity, and to find the value of understanding as we go. For Plato, learning is loaded with value -- intellectual and moral and political; and this – I say – is right, important, and desperately fragile. Socratic conversations have complex conditions which illuminate their philosophical purpose; and they matter more than ever right now. Inquiry and learning, thus understood, are threatened in the present crisis of our intellectual institutions. Plato may help us to see just what we have to lose.

Socratic conversations work by question and answer, and the questions are driven by puzzlement. At first Socrates asks 'what is courage?' or 'what is justice?'. But he can't answer those questions. Then he wonders about how we are to ask, and to answer, the questions; and then about why it matters. As philosophers say, the conversations are both first order and higher order; and those differences of order, of the level of the question, are reflected in the dialogues: in conversations within conversations, interruptions, offset against dramatic outbursts and sulky silences, declarations of friendship and protestations of good will and unconvincing exits. Everything said comes under scrutiny somehow, and the conditions of scrutiny themselves are questioned over and over, so that even when no answers are forthcoming, the questions provoke thought, critical reflection, and a better grasp of what is involved in asking the question in the first place. But this all arises because the first question is asked and the answer fails. The puzzles that ensue drive it all forward: and those puzzles are both a problem for the argument and an attitude of the people engaged on it. Dialogue is between people.

⁷ *Euthyphro* 14c; *Phaedo* 107b; *Republic* 394b; *Crito* 46b

That Socratic inquiry is *joint* is no mere formality. On the contrary, Socrates calls attention, not only to his own attitudes towards his interlocutor, but also to the interlocutor's attitudes to him.⁸ Often those attitudes come seriously unstuck in the course of the discussion; but the dramatic explosions of anger and frustration on the parts of Socrates' companions underline the background conditions of goodwill between the interlocutors. Socrates, of course, keeps his temper and his cool, infuriatingly, throughout; and Plato's readers often mistakenly think that Socrates' attitudes to his companions are somehow insincere. On the contrary, Socrates' portrayed attitudes illustrate an important feature of these conversations: that in being *joint* they are collaborative, conditioned by positive attitudes on the parts of the participants. They fail when the interlocutor fails to observe that condition; and those failures emphasise the point.

These encounters, therefore, are based on deep personal engagements, not merely abstract arguments. It is a consequence of this that they are never value-free. But this is not – as is often supposed – because Plato represents for us the good guys and the bad guys – as it were, good and bad already. On the contrary, the situating of the conversations in personal dialogue is the source of their psychological and ethical content; it emphasizes, by means of the dialogue form, that this psychological and ethical content is not incidental to inquiry but essential to it. This is not the dialogues' failure, but their success: and it persists in various different and complex ways throughout Plato's work.

Plato's Socrates, in conversation, asks his friends what they think; and he does not tell them what to think. But the interlocutor regularly fails to come up with an answer that satisfies as an answer. Often the discussion then runs into the ground; or changes direction; or restarts at some other order of discussion. But even then, four significant things are happening.

⁸ E.g. friendship *Gorgias* 487; Callicles' bad temper, *Gorgias* 505c ff; Critias' discomfiture, *Charmides* 169c; Euthyphro's hurried exit, *Euthyphro* 15e.

First, each person somehow comes to reflect on their own point of view -- whether that is a positive thesis or an objection to it.⁹ In doing that, each comes to some explicit articulation of what they do indeed think, and en route some sense of what it means to articulate his views or his objections.

Second, as the joint enterprise proceeds, each comes to understand the view from the standpoint of another. This process has (again) a crucially second order feature: they may not say what piety is, or courage; but they do make progress in seeing how to answer such questions, what the conditions for an answer would be. In so doing, each comes to occupy a different stance from where they began: they think, not only about the question, but about thinking about the question; and they do that in ways that are responsive to the fact that their partner has a different view. This, I suggest, rings true: inquiry should be, not dispassionate, but attentive to the differences of perspective of different parties; it should have a sense of what is involved in taking a stance, in having a view, in seeing through the eyes of another, as well as oneself.

Notice, third, that this happens in the course of the discussion. Conversation with Socrates is a slow, fraught process; but it is still a process, something that happens step by step. It is, certainly, reflective; but that reflection is predicated on both its psychological content (the responsiveness to questions, the drive to answer, the anxiety at inconsistency) and its ethical content (it engages fully with the other person, and in ways that privilege open and honest discussion).

This, fourth, is a consequence of these being conversations. Two points of view are portrayed – reflecting together on some subject. Each interlocutor responds to the other, either by answering questions or by asking them – and this responsiveness is an acute attention to what the other says or asks. Socrates, over and over again, listens to what his interlocutor has to say, and he hopes his

⁹ E.g. when they explicitly change their minds, e.g. Protarchus at *Philebus* 19c ff., or even firmly to resist Socrates' claims, Protarchus again at *Philebus* 36c; Charmides and Critias at *Charmides* 160 ff. or compare Socrates' own reflection on the oracle, *Apology* 22e.

interlocutor will listen to his questions, too.¹⁰ This attitude of listening is often read in the tones of sarcasm, and glossed as ‘Socratic irony’. But that is not quite right. Socratic irony, rather, is an attitude of non-dogmatism; and non-dogmatism is one of the ways in which listening best takes place – to listen, you must be open to what the other says; so to listen, you must not just be the representative or the mouthpiece of an opposed view, even where your task is also to offer criticism of what the other says.

This acute attention is difficult to acquire. Many of Socrates’ interlocutors fail. But to the ultimate success of these exchanges attention is essential; without it they disintegrate, end in bad temper and recrimination, or even in the hemlock. The jointness of this talk, that is to say, involves the responsiveness of the two to each other – they do not just talk in turn, they talk together, and that requires that they listen as well as speak. This openness of attitude figure as accountability: what it is to ask and answer questions is to be accountable for the answers, or for the questions, and, thence, for the conduct of the conversation as a whole.¹¹

These attitudes, therefore, are not merely formal. They are not some dramatized version of the idea that argument should be value-free or abstract. On the contrary, Socratic argument is never value-free, because it is enmeshed in the examination of a life. Equally, Socratic conversations are not merely governed by good manners. Socrates is always civil; but that is because his civility represents his commitment to listening. In attending, he does not merely wait the appropriate amount of time, or observe accustomed limits to his own speaking, or keep his eyes fixed on his interlocutor because he is supposed to do so. He eschews long speeches (up to a point) because long speeches fail in responsiveness to the other person; the deep reasons for conversational good behavior run far deeper than commitment to conventional manners. For they are

¹⁰ E.g. *Euthydemus* passim on what is heard, what is understood, and on the sophists’ theoretical resistance to a different point of view, 283-8.

¹¹ *Republic* 531d-e Compare Socrates’ complaints that his interlocutor did not answer the question he asked: e.g. *Euthyphro* 6c-d; *Meno* 72a-b

of the essence of joint inquiry, attitudes that are hard-learned and hard-won in the course of thousands of conversations of this kind.

Listening, thus, has moral content. For it acknowledges that the other point of view may indeed have something to say – it requires respect and attention for the other point of view, modesty for one’s own, care for the ways the different views interact, truthfulness about what one says and honesty – the honesty to change one’s mind, or to engage to change someone else’s. For Socrates, then, the process of inquiry is not merely the development of a disposition, or a skill, or a capacity. Rather, it is connected to virtue – the virtue that joint conversation both fosters and develops and demands. And as is the way with virtue, it is learned as we practice it. As a virtue, it is hard won; but once won, it may come as second nature.

But this is Plato’s Socrates. These conversations are not just about listening; they are about learning and about inquiry, on the way to knowledge of the truth, understanding of reality. Plato’s Socrates is no mere relativist. Thus in the *Republic* Socrates insists on the connections between this slow process of inquiry by question and answer and the development of our intellectual vision, of our ability to see the truth, and, crucially, to understand it. In such joint exchanges, one interlocutor does not teach another, or tell another what to think, or win, or overcome. Understanding, for Plato, is indexed to learning and inquiry, not to winning, or to acquiring intellectual stuff: the growth of understanding is a part of the intellectual work that talking together does. And this kind of discursive approach Plato takes to be necessary for proper inquiry – even if the dialogue takes place within a single person’s soul. Without inquiry the objects of knowledge are inaccessible to us.

Plato invites us to think about learning and understanding as seeing or coming to see. When we see, in the ordinary sense, what we see are particular things; and if we improve our seeing, we see them better. But when we understand better, what we do, in any particular situation, is judge better. This is not merely a matter of seeing different things (as some versions of Platonism insist); rather it

is a developed capacity to see things better, a capacity of good judgment. That capacity, on this view, is the result of long and arduous practice and reflection; its goodness is a consequence of that, no mere happenstance, no whim or subjective fancy, but a well-established well-founded capacity to get the things in the domain of your vision right, in all the various senses of that word.

In telling us about how we *learn* Plato reiterates how learning transforms the person who learns; and confirms, too, the moral context in which this is done. (Learning is not accumulating bits of knowledge, like piling up rewards). For Plato, the subject who seeks to know matters as much as the objects she seeks to understand; and if conversation is the ideal way of inquiry, then the virtues that are acquired are not merely intellectual virtues, but moral ones as well – for then each party matters as much as the other. Because conversation, talking together, is at the heart of all of this, the virtues of the intellect and the virtues of moral character come together in the same process of coming to understand.

Further, if we think about this process like that, it is easy enough to see that coming to understand is a good in itself: think about the moments when we see that we see something; when we suddenly find clarity and depth in our thinking; when we are able to grasp the view of another and understand it; and compare it to our own and understand that too. It would be daft to suppose that we need to show what understanding is for (it is a feature of intrinsic goodness that it shows up the daftness of the repeated question ‘what for?’). Understanding, epistemic virtue, is just worth having, on its own. And if understanding is a collaborative matter, we may agree that it is a good for both parties (it is good for me to be understood, and for you to understand; or vice versa). If, further, learning is practised in public, it is a public good: thought, reflection, dissent, and understanding are goods in themselves for the polity. That is what the Athenians denied when they used the hemlock; and it is what we are at risk of losing altogether.

4. It has long been a commonplace that teaching is best done by the ‘Socratic method’ – especially in higher education. Socrates, of course, denies that he

teaches, and he denies that there are any teachers of understanding of this kind. But something is right here. For at the core of the conception of the university is the thought that we learn by sharing in a common discourse, by talking together, by learning together to see how to see the truth. This is central to what we do – irrespective of our subject – whether it be philosophy or physics, music or mathematics – we learn how to think, as well as deploying our thought on the specific issues of one subject or another; and we go on doing this over our long intellectual lives. Socrates’ intuitions tell us the truth: learning is something that we do, with care and rigour, slowly and circuitously, with integrity and honesty and, above all, together. These features of learning are not incidental to it, but essential to it. None of us is here, then, to teach; but to be learners together – it is this feature of the academic community which matters so much (the distinction between research and teaching has long been multiply pernicious). The acquisition of information can be done by all sorts of means – in a laboratory or a library, at a lecture or on the internet; but acquiring information is no good at all without the wisdom and the understanding to grapple with it, and to grapple with ourselves. No matter how many things we know, it will make no difference, if our understanding fails.

If all of that is right, then the central activity of a university should be exactly this kind of learning together – joint activities between student and staff, between staff and staff and between student and student – no matter how hard and demanding they may be. It makes no difference whether we are philosophers or physicists, students of literature or of the cell; all must start with developing the means to understand what it is we do, of developing the hard virtues that lie at the foundation of the community of thought. For here we are together confronting questions which may themselves be intractable, but whose consideration helps us to advance in our understanding – of the nature of thought, of the nature of nature and the nature of culture, of the nature of ourselves.

Further, we do indeed think that the understanding we seek is a matter of both moral and intellectual virtue. Let me give you a local example. In 2010 – as

many of you may remember – this department was threatened with targeted redundancies and the threat that we would have to compete with each other for our jobs (hardly Socratic there, then). In the midst of the furore that followed, one event shone out: a group of our graduate students [many of whom I am very glad to see here this evening, and delighted to celebrate] this group spent several weeks discussing the ‘consultation’ proposal that had been put to us, and debating it with the college (I note that another such is on its rounds, doing its irretrievable damage to the Medical School, and exempting those whose loss will do damage to King’s reputation – ignoring the damage of the procedure itself) They produced a powerful analysis of the document, focusing both on the poor argumentation and on the wrong that poor argumentation supported. This made, I believe, a considerable impact on the ‘consultation’ process itself -- which was withdrawn. But recall how we thought about what those students did. We were unbelievably proud of them. We admired them, I think, and what they did because it displayed the virtues I have been describing. It was not that they used their analytic skills in the service of some moral end – not that, for them, the intellectual capacity was useful. Rather, they engaged with what they saw as a moral disgrace directly in ways that were both morally and intellectually admirable: with courage, integrity and respect; and those ways were, I think in this case, indissoluble.

Our own attitudes to events such as this, I put to you, reinforce the thought that thinking is as Plato’s Socrates suggested it to be. But that kind of thinking is fragile – and not only because we are financially squozen. Think about where it may go wrong. I start again, thinking about philosophy and how it works; but what I say is generalizable for other academic disciplines, as much for the sciences as the humanities, all of which demand the kind of critical reflectiveness that Socrates practices; and all of which, if I am right, need to be governed by both intellectual and moral norms. Philosophy sometimes seems otherwise – as a competition to make sure one’s own point of view, one’s theory, one’s pet project wins; and devil take the hindmost. A competitor cannot afford to listen, to hear any other view than her own. She cannot engage in joint inquiry, since that is predicated on listening and on taking a view outside her own. Even if it happens

that what she says is true, she cannot, in failing to see other points of view, come to understand how thinking is configured or explained: she is stuck in the first order. That competitive approach is an easy vice – and its collaborative counterpart is fragile; so competition often wins..... It must not do so. For competition makes what we do shallow and insincere. Competition isolates us, and traduces our humanity. Competition damages thought and openness and modesty and civility. We should resist competition for our own sakes, of course, but also for the sake of our institutions. Competition feeds the rampant desire for power; feeds it and makes it insatiable, at our expense and the expense of our students. Our institutions have sold their souls to the market and the league table and the mission groups and all those wretched acronyms (I'll come back to them...). I refuse to sell my soul too.

5. Socrates prefers death to giving up philosophy;¹² and he insists that his kind of inquiry is not only a private good, but a public one. 'Follow the argument where it leads', says Socrates. What does that involve? Socratic argument does not merely address the question at hand, but also the conditions for answering it. So Socratic argument is unlimited in scope – it deals with the conditions of thought as much as the content of the thoughts themselves – and those conditions include not only the cognitive conditions of what is said, but the entire context of the discussion. That was Socrates' final point: he will follow the argument where it leads -- even unto death. For in understanding how to think, we had better not think that there are things we cannot consider, places where we cannot go, discussions that are barred to us.

So following the argument where it leads requires that we can expose any thought at all to scrutiny. Of course that had better not mean that everything is up for grabs at once: this kind of intellectual openness does not mean that we start an argument with no assumptions; nor that we call everything into question all at the same time. But it does mean that anything is up for grabs: there is nothing that we cannot inspect or discuss or ask or assess or criticize or condemn in the course of the argument.

¹² *Apology* 29d

Now notice the scope of 'Follow the argument where it leads'. For it is in fact a fundamental principle of academic freedom: it suggests that thought does not have, should not have, constraints or boundaries or no-go areas, whether those no-go areas are intellectual or moral or political or institutional. Indeed, it is a principle which chimes with (even if it is stronger than) the Haldane principle – a (much-disputed) claim about the nature and role of university funding.¹³ 'Follow the argument where it leads' matters deeply because it points to how the ways of inquiry that Socrates advocates are not such as to be restricted by external pressures or constraints.

But the increasingly prescriptive modes of contemporary university management are deeply inimical to these central ways of thought: and, in my recent experience, more and more overtly so. University management finds some discussion uncomfortable or even dangerous – questions about internal management, critique of the nature of the institution or the nature of the sector. Sometimes discussion of these matters are represented as failure to match the university's brand;¹⁴ or as undermining of the university's policies;ⁱ or as somehow or other gross misconduct (the modern equivalent of the indictment against Socrates). This is wrong, on principle. Even if we set aside the grotesquery of the idea of a university's 'brand' (should we do that? Surely not)

¹³ *The 'Haldane principle'* derives from Haldane's original insight (Haldane Report 1918) that scientific research should not be directly determined by government; it was presented as a principle by Lord Hailsham in the '60s, and has been much contested since, see report of the Commons Select Committee on Innovation Universities Science and Skills

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmdius/168/16807.htm> Compare discussion by Noam Chomsky

<http://www.chomsky.info/talks/20110406.htm> and David Edgerton

<http://www.historyandpolicy.org/papers/policy-paper-88.html#S3>

¹⁴ <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/durham-v-c-wanted-student-paper-to-be-an-advertisement/2012414.article>

academic thought and critical reflection must not be constrained nor prevented from discussing and scrutinizing, not only the conditions of argument, but its context – and that context includes its institutionalisation. ‘Brands’ must be trumped by freedom of inquiry.

6. Socratic modes of thought, I say, should be pervasive, throughout the institution. Academic institutions should not be managed containers for open thinking hermetically sealed from the outside, nor ghettoized boxes in which we may experience what it is to talk together, but forswear it when we walk in the street.ⁱⁱ On the contrary, if I am right in insisting that this kind of developed understanding is an obvious public good,¹⁵ then its restriction is a public evil. In inquiry we talk together; in our institutions we should talk together too. The demands of moral and intellectual virtue, I conclude, should be felt throughout the university system; and it was for this that Socrates chose death over giving up talking together with the Athenians.

Talking together requires that both parties attend to the other; that each listen as well as speak. What is involved in that kind of listening? On the view I have outlined, listening is ethically loaded: it requires a kind of attentiveness to the other point of view which is easy to fake and easier still to neglect. It is also hard to diagnose: someone may, of course, have all the appearances of listening; may even be able to repeat what the other has said, and yet not listen at all.

The refusal to listen is often betrayed by the use and abuse of language. That lies of course in the vacuous rhetoric of management. But it can be pinpointed. Remember that ‘consultation’ document. In the document ‘consultation’ meant the legal requirement of warning of impending redundancy, and in it consultation in the vernacular sense was closed; when the document was defeated, its proposers claimed that it was open after all – and those who had inflicted pain and humiliation on so many of us saved face and never apologized. After all, they were only consulting.... The moral disgrace was papered over by

¹⁵ Compare the account of Stefan Collini *What are universities for?* (2012)

sleight of word. Equivocation is not merely a logical danger; it is an ethical one, the mark of failing to listen.¹⁶

Or think about metaphor. Imagine that you want to enlarge the scope of your discussion to include several people, in full cognizance of their significance and their ethical standing. When you do that, do not cascade the message to your recipients. When some instruction is 'cascaded' to me, I am offended not only by the rebarbative grammar (if 'cascade' is a verb it is intransitive) but by its imperative and its disrespectful mode. Socrates points to how respect is fundamental to open intellectual and moral exchange: the abuse of language damages respect and shows up where it has been withheld.

Or think about private languages. Remember – as I bitterly do – the days when the Quality Assurance Agency held sway, and the rise of the language of Qaahili? Recall what those private languages did, and still do – they make anodyne what is pernicious. The REF has become common parlance; but it is still disgraceful. KEATS is an online non-learning system, at which John Keats (whose little boy 'stood in his shoes and he wondered, he wondered...') is turning in his grave. These private languages, these smart acronyms and logos and brands camouflage harm, and exclude from consultation those who are not in the know; they protect from criticism the vacuity of these measures; they load us with guilt (which I still feel) that we ever became experts in this debased talk. Who remembers the distinction between aims and objectives, cast in terms that could somehow or other tick the boxes, or fail to tick them, and only if you know the private language? Obscurantism is a danger to scholarship; and it is a danger to scholars too – it is a weapon used to shore up the shakiness of these systems against proper critical reflection; and we have been too busy, too frightened, too insouciant to call it out. But we have lost more than we know: when the institution does not listen, we are talking to ourselves.

¹⁶ 'Equivocation is primarily an activity: men [sic] equivocate, and if words do too, that is in the sense that they are the instruments by which men equivocate. ... a man equivocates in a context where he uses some word or phrase with one meaning and repeats it with another meaning in that context...' C. Kirwan on Aristotle, *Philosophical Quarterly* 1979.

Return once more to the moral structure of the Socratic conversation. This involved, I argued, each interlocutor hearing the other, taking responsibility for where the conversation might go, and being accountable for what they said. It is to this accountability that we should hold those who attempt to curtail our freedoms. In the present structure of the universities, that accountability has vanished; in part because we failed to insist upon it, and in part because we have been taken over by alien institutions, ill-fitted to the proper development of understanding, in which accountability has comprehensively failed.

In the wake of Dearing and Lambert the structures of university governance have been changed.¹⁷ The pressure then was twofold; first to see universities as mass education organisations, modeled on business; the second to suppose that good judgment for such cases is to be provided, not by those who are centrally involved, but precisely those who are not. This had two effects on universities round the country: College Councils were reconstituted, composed largely of lay advisors; and Senates or Academic Boards were reduced to a merely advisory role.

What would underpin the thought that a lay Council would be appropriate for a University? The analogue, on a charitable view, was supposed to be a jury: presented with the evidence a collective of opinions are likely to come up with a sensible adjudication of matters of fact, uncontaminated by knowing too much law. The epistemic principle here is a democratic one: that a plurality of points of view will produce a good judgment. Likewise a group of lay advisors would be best placed to make judgments about university policy uncontaminated by knowing too much about what is going on, and uncontaminated, so it is

¹⁷ Dearing Report *Higher education in the learning society* (1997) 15.43-50; Lambert Report: 'Business is critical of what it sees as the slow-moving, bureaucratic and risk-averse style of university management. However, there have been significant changes for the better in recent years. Many universities have developed strong executive structures to replace management by committee, and have raised the quality of their decision-making and of their governance. Strategic planning and the process of resource allocation have been improved.' *The Lambert Review of Business-University Collaboration* (2003)

supposed, by having values at stake which would render their judgments less 'objective' [the contrasts between fact and value, or objective and subjective, or absolute and relative, were let out of the box by philosophical Pandoras who failed to see that there was no hope they would not be abused]. But the analogy between juries and Councils is, of course, absurd. However individual and personal may be the conversations which I have insisted should lie at the heart of the academic life, they do not occur at random, or without deep experience and thought about the very conduct of the conversations themselves. On the contrary, the learning that occurs in a university, however open-ended it may be, it is profoundly informed by whatever went on before and around; these engagements are not isolated nor are they value-free (it does not follow from this that their value is 'merely' subjective; nor that it can be made 'objective' only by the application of some algorithm or other which might turn expert judgments into spurious numbers). It is folly to commit their navigation to people who have precisely none of the experience in question: folly and an inevitable road towards competition and spurious markets.

Accountability has been twisted beyond recognition, so that experts are here made accountable to either to lay people or to managers whose managerial expertise – supposing there to be such a thing – should not be conflated with their being in a position to make academic judgments. From the point of view of the academics, we are talking to ourselves; from the point of view of the managers, we already say too much. What is at stake here? I put to you that it is our intellectual virtues, through and through. Academics should not be accounting to councils and managers: on the contrary, accounting, as Socrates makes clear, should be made to those who are in a position to make good judgments about the academic enterprise: the academics themselves. This is the core of the issue; and it needs to be understood not only by government but also by our own institutions – the institutions which shamefully seek to restrict what we say.

7. Our university system is going badly wrong. But it is too easy to say that this has only happened because the balance of power has changed, and because

management has taken to itself the control of academic decision. Socrates again: if we talk together, then each of us is accountable, and each of us is responsible for what happens next: and that means us. The system itself has come out like this because we have allowed it to do so. We have allowed competition to flourish. We have not laughed loudly enough at the suggestion on every university's website that league tables mean anything at all, we have not protested enough that learning is not a product nor a brand. We have gone along with the urge to win out above our colleagues in other institutions. We have competed for grants, for ratings, for students, for resources, and for prestige. We have done that even where we have known that the resources and the prestige are limited, and where we would recognise, had we dared to do so, that our winning means that someone else loses; and that those losses often do damage where damage is least deserved – on the weak and the dispossessed. If one university flourishes, on the present arrangements, another fails to thrive; and the students who may only be able to go there will become the field casualties. If one university wins, another loses, and those who need it are left outside.

It is essential, I claim, to the activity of universities that its participants talk together, with the full intellectual moral and political sense of what that means. This central activity is no respecter of persons: just as Socrates would talk to anyone as they went to the market on their way to buy a cabbage, so these engagements are not the preserve of some elite, already demarcated by standing or achievement or importance or role. However nervous Plato may have been of the decisions and the emotions of large groups of people acting en masse, his Socrates represents the thought that anyone can learn to talk like this, regardless of status or gender or race [poster]. The root and branch rethinking of the university system in this country – a rethinking is long overdue and which will surely be precipitated by the disastrous funding regime -- should attend from the very start to the demands of equality -- equality which is fundamental to the flourishing of the society as a whole.¹⁸

¹⁸ Thomas Docherty *THES* April 2014
<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/features/whose-side-are-we-on-in-this-moral-contest/2/2012791.article>

But we are a long way from this rethinking at present. Marketised academic life is like football: the gallop up the league tables is incompatible with processes of learning that are slow, open, unpredictable – whether they are conducted with students or with colleagues – whether we are talking here about what is called teaching or about what is called research. Marketisation is fundamentally unequal, elitist, damaging to the weak and downtrodden. Socrates could speak to all comers; and so should we.ⁱⁱⁱ In our present world, we do not (more shockingly, we are not allowed to do so – the brand silences us again). As Thomas Docherty has acutely pointed out – ‘widening participation’ is merely a sop to Cerberus, a public relations exercise that covers up the fact that if you are in the Premier league, you never play with teams from the Conference, let alone with the kids who are playing football in the street. Having a mascot from the street does not equality make, when the entire structure is directed towards the inequality of competition, to the struggle for power among those who should, but do not, care for the deep values of moral and intellectual virtue; who traduce both the public good by greed and the primacy of honest truth by censoring whatever does not accord with a spurious brand; and we have not brought them to book. Learning cannot be put up for sale like this; and we are responsible for saying so, loud and clear.

I came to this Department in 1990; it was a revelation to me then that philosophy could be done in the collaborative Socratic mode (led at that time by the incomparable Mark Sainsbury). Ever since then – perhaps most of all in the last few years as the crisis of the universities deepens, and for us from the debacle of 2010 and its fallout – this Department has stood for doing what is right, not merely what is expedient or pragmatic or cheap at the expense of persons (a series of requirements that change in their content by the month, from firing to hiring to retiring to buying back, or not). The Principal once asked me whether we are a happy department; and the President asked me the same question. My reply is that we flourish – and together. It has been my extraordinary privilege and joy to have been a part of that: to feel, however it may affect me personally, that none of my dear friends and colleagues stand down from the defence of

what we do, and how we should do it. I would like to express, therefore, my utter and profound gratitude to my Departmental colleagues, present and past, and to all my students – some of whom became my colleagues, and many of whom are here tonight – who gave me the gift of watching them flourish and stand up in their turn. And in standing down myself, I leave them with an injunction: it is part of what we do that we take responsibility for how it is done – bear the responsibility well.

ⁱ [Refs the Durham case]

ⁱⁱ THE METAPHYSICS OF UNIVERSITIES ; the rustic and the urbane sceptic.

ⁱⁱⁱ [REFS and reservations]