The Idea of a University

Michael Oakeshott

It is a favourite theory of mine that what people call "ideals" and "purposes" are never themselves the source of human activity; they are shorthand expressions for the real spring of conduct, which is a disposition to do certain things and a knowledge of how to do them. Human beings do not start from rest and spring into activity only when attracted by a purpose to be achieved. To be alive is to be perpetually active. The purposes we attribute to particular kinds of activity are only abridgements of our knowledge of how to engage in this or that activity.

This, for example, is obviously so in the activity we call "science." Scientific activity is not the pursuit of a premeditated end; nobody knows or can imagine where it will reach. There is no perfection, prefigured in our minds, which we can set up as a standard by which to judge current achievements. What holds science together and gives it impetus and direction is not a known purpose to be achieved, but the knowledge scientists have of how to conduct a scientific investigation. Their particular pursuits and purposes are not superimposed upon that knowledge, but emerge within it. Or again, a cook is not a man who first has the vision of a pie and then tries to make it; he is a man skilled in cookery, and both his projects and his achievements spring from his skill. Or, to take a third example, a man may think he has a "mission" in life, and he may think that his activity is governed by this "mission." But, in fact, it is the other way about; his missionary activity consists in knowing how to behave in a certain way and in trying to behave in that way; and what he calls his "mission" is only a shorthand expression of this knowledge and endeavour.

For this reason, the current talk about the "mission" and the "function" of a university goes rather over my head; I think I can understand what is intended, but it seems to me an unfortunate way of talking. It assumes that there is something called "a university," a contrivance of some sort, something you could make another of tomorrow if you had enough money, of which it is sensible to ask, What is it "for"? And one of the criticisms of contemporary universities is that they are not as clear as they ought to be about their "function." I am not at all surprised. There is plenty that might properly be criticized in our universi-

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ties, but to quarrel with them because they are not clear about their "function" is to make a mistake about their character. A university is not a machine for achieving a particular purpose or producing a particular result; it is a manner of human activity. And it would be necessary for a university to advertise itself as pursuing a particular purpose only if it were talking to people so ignorant that they had to be spoken to in baby-language, or if it were so little confident of its power to embrace those who came to it that it had to call attention to its incidental charms. My impression, however, is that our universities have not yet sunk so low as to make this necessary. They may not know what they are "for," they may be very hazy about their "function," but I think they do know something that is much more important—namely, how to go about the business of being a university. This knowledge is not a gift of nature; it is a knowledge of a tradition, it has to be acquired, it is always mixed up with error and ignorance, and it may even be lost. But, it is only by exploring this sort of knowledge (which I believe not to have been lost) that we can hope to discover what may be called the "idea" of a university.

A university is a number of people engaged in a certain sort of activity: the Middle Ages called it *Studium;* we may call it "the pursuit of learning." This activity is one of the properties, indeed one of the virtues of a civilized way of living; the scholar has his place beside the poet, the priest, the soldier, the politician and the man of business in any civilized society. The universities do not, however, have a monopoly of this activity. The hermit scholar in his study, an academy famous for a particular branch of learning, a school for young children, are each participants in this activity and each of them is admirable, but they are not universities. What distinguishes a university is a special manner of engaging in the pursuit of learning. It is a corporate body of scholars, each devoted to a particular branch of learning: what is characteristic is the pursuit of learning as a co-operative enterprise. The members of this corporation are not spread about the world, meeting occasionally or not at all; they live in permanent proximity to one another. And consequently we should neglect part of the character of a university if we omitted to think of it as a place. A university, moreover, is a home of learning, a place where a tradition of learning is preserved and extended, and where the necessary apparatus for the pursuit of learning has been gathered together.

Of the scholars who compose a university, some may be expected to devote an unbroken leisure to learning, their fellows having the advantage of their knowledge from their conversation and the world benefiting, perhaps, from their writings. A place of learning without this kind of scholar could scarcely be called a university. Others, however, will engage themselves to teach as well as to learn. But here again, it is the special manner of the pedagogic enterprise which distinguishes a university. Those who come to be taught at a university have to provide evidence that they are not merely beginners; and not only do they have displayed before them the learning of their teachers, but

they are offered a curriculum of study, to be followed by a test and the award of a degree. Three classes of person, then, go to compose a university as we know it—the scholar, the scholar who is also a teacher, and those who come to be taught, the undergraduates. And the presence of these three classes, and the relations that prevail between them, determine the distinctive place of a university in the wider enterprise we call the pursuit of learning.

Let us consider the activity of these three classes. Everyone who knows anything about it, knows that there is a difference between the pursuit of learning and the acquisition of information. It is a subtle difference, for an ill-informed man can scarcely be called a learned man. But a scholar is something more than a picker-up of unconsidered trifles: he knows something about what he is looking for, and he can distinguish between what he knows and what he does not know. The world's contempt for the "poor pedant" is often mistaken; it judges the scholar's activity by its use, and finds it pedantic when it appears useless. But this is a false standard; what is reprehensible is not the pursuit of knowledge which has no immediate use, nor that attention to detail which is unavoidable in scholarship, but that blind groping about among fragments of learning which are known only as fragments into which scholarship sometimes degenerates. This does not happen as often as the world thinks; and perhaps it is less liable to happen in a university than elsewhere.

There is, indeed, no simple way of determining what composes the world of learning; no clear reason—such as usefulness—can be found to justify its parts. They do not represent a premeditated purpose, but a slowly changing tradition. As the years pass, new studies rise above the horizon and old studies are rejuvenated by coming in contact with the new. Unavoidably, each scholar is something of a specialist who cultivates a chosen field. But it rarely happens that this is a very narrow field, and a scholar may often be found turning from one study to another or poking his nose into something which is not his chief business. Nevertheless, the pursuit of learning may have the appearance of a fragmentary enterprise; and even if we suspect that this is what it looks like when seen only from the outside, it will not seem far-fetched to enquire whether some superior integrating force is not wanted to give coherence and proportion to the whole pursuit. Do we not need a map, it may plausibly be asked, a map on which the relations between the parts of the world of learning are clearly displayed? Would not the whole thing be better for a little glue to hold it together? And some who feel most strongly about this are to be found filling in the interstices between the sciences with a sticky mess called "culture," in the belief that they are supplying a desperate need. But both the diagnosis and the remedy spring from a sad misconception.

The world of learning needs no extraneous cement to hold it together; its parts move in a single magnetic field, and the need for go-betweens arises only when the current is gratuitously cut off. The pursuit of learning is not a race in which the competitors jockey for the best place, it is not even an argument or

a symposium; it is a conversation. And the peculiar virtue of a university (as a place of many studies) is to exhibit it in this character, each study appearing as a voice whose tone is neither tyrannous nor plangent, but humble and conversable. A conversation does not need a chairman, it has no predetermined course, we do not ask what it is "for," and we do not judge its excellence by its conclusion; it has no conclusion, but is always put by for another day. Its integration is not superimposed but springs from the quality of the voices which speak, and its value lies in the relics it leaves behind in the minds of those who participate.

The scholar, then, is one who knows how to engage in the activity of learning; his natural voice is not that of the preacher or of the instructor. Yet it is not surprising that among scholars should be found teachers, and that university should be a place where one might go with the expectation of learning something. Not every scholar will have the sympathy that makes a great teacher, but every genuine scholar unavoidably imparts to those capable of recognizing it something of his knowledge on how to pursue learning. His power to teach springs from the force and inspiration of his knowledge, from his immersion in the pursuit of learning, which may be felt even by those little touched with the ambitions of a scholar. And even those whose learning and sympathy are ready, those who are pre-eminently capable of imparting what they know, must be expected to be something different from assiduous instructors. They may be trusted to know the rules, but they will not be much concerned to teach conclusions. One may go to some sorts of art schools and be taught ten ways of drawing a cat or a dozen tricks to remember in painting an eye, but the scholar as teacher will teach, not how to draw or to paint, but how to see. He may be easily articulate, or he may find it difficult to throw off his own doubts and hesitancies, but, since he is a scholar, it does not belong to his character to speak with no voice in particular, and he will have nothing to do with vulgarization of learning which regards it merely as a means to passing an examination or winning a certificate.

But a university may be credited with a power to teach which goes beyond that of its individual scholars. It is not an academy drawing its inspiration from a single pre-eminent man; it is a body of scholars who supply one another's imperfections, both personal and scholastic. It accommodates many different sorts of teacher, and each sort draws its power from its intercourse with other sorts. When we commend the easily articulate don who has a ready answer for all our questions, we should remember that he is not simply a superlatively lively mind but is often the spokesman for the less articulate and perhaps more profound and original minds with which he is in daily communication: without them he would hardly exist. A university, then, is an institution peculiarly well-adapted to the weakness and ignorance of mankind because its excellence does not depend upon the appearance of a universal genius, though it

knows how to make room for one should one emerge. Moreover, like the House of Commons or an old established business, it imparts something without having expressly to teach it; and what it imparts in this way is at least the manners of the conversation.

The scholar, the teacher, and lastly those who come to be taught, the undergraduate: he, or she, also has a distinctive character. First, he is not a child, not a beginner. He has already had his schooling elsewhere, and has learned enough, morally and intellectually, to take a chance with himself upon the open sea. He is neither a child nor an adult, but stands in a strange middle moment of life when he knows only enough of himself and of the world which passes before him to wish to know more. He has not yet found what he loves, but neither is he jealous of time, of accidents, or of rivals. Perhaps the phrase from the fairy tale suits him best—he has come to seek his intellectual fortune. But, further, he is not the first who has passed from school to university, he is not like a stranger who knows nothing of what to expect, so that everything has to be explained to him on his arrival in words of one syllable. And if the tradition to which he belongs has already taught him anything, it will have taught him that he will not find his intellectual fortune, once and for all, in three years at a university. He is, therefore, we may suppose, in tune with what he is to find and is prepared to make use of it.

And what does he find? If he is not unlucky, he finds a strongly flowing current of activity, men and women engaged in the pursuit of learning, and an invitation to participate in some manner in this activity. This invitation is extended alike to those already touched by an ambition for a life of learning and to those who have no such ambition. A university is not a contrivance for making scholars; its ideal is not a world populated solely by scholars. For about 400 years in England the education of the would-be scholar and of the man of the world has been the same, and this tradition belongs to our idea of a university.

Beyond this, a university would be found to offer the undergraduate a limited variety of studies from which to make his choice; for, of course, it is discriminating about what it teaches, and not everything that engages the attentions of its scholars is thought suitable for undergraduate study. Where this particular selection of subjects came from, it would be hard to say. Some are old, others new; some—like medicine and law—have a semi-professional appearance, others have little direct connection with the world outside. Certainly none of these studies owes its place in a university curriculum to any reason so simple as its professional usefulness or because the knowledge concerned is easy to teach or easy to test. Indeed, the only characteristic common to them all is that of being a recognized branch of scholarship; in each the pursuit of learning is reflected and consequently each has within itself—when we drink deeply of it—a power to educate. Together they represent, at least in outline, the conversation which is being carried on in the university; and the

undergraduate would never be tempted to mistake his university for an institute in which only one voice was heard, or for a polytechnic in which only the mannerisms of the voices were taught.

This, then, to the undergraduate, is the distinctive mark of a university; it is a place where he has the opportunity of education in conversation with his teachers, his fellows and himself, and where he is not encouraged to confuse education with training for a profession, with learning the tricks of a trade, with preparation for future particular service in society or with the acquisition of a kind of moral and intellectual outfit to see him through life. Whenever an ulterior purpose of this sort makes its appearance, education (which is concerned with persons, not functions) steals out of the back door with noiseless steps. The pursuit of learning for the power it may bring has its roots in a covetous egoism which is not less egoistic or less covetous when it appears as a so-called "social purpose," and with this a university has nothing to do. The form of its curriculum has no such design; and the manner of its teaching—teachers interested in the pupil himself, in what he is thinking, in the quality of his mind, in his immortal soul, and not in what sort of a schoolmaster or administrator he can be made into—the manner of this teaching has no such intention.

But further a university has something else to offer the under-graduate, and I take this to be its most characteristic gift because it is exclusive to a university and is rooted in the character of university education as neither a beginning nor an end, but a middle. A man may at any time in his life begin to explore a new branch of learning or engage in fresh activity, but only at a university may he do this without a rearrangement of his scarce resources of time and energy; in later life he is committed to so much that he cannot easily throw off. The characteristic gift of a university is the gift of an interval. Here is an opportunity to put aside the hot allegiances of youth without the necessity of at once acquiring new loyalties to take their place. Here is a break in the tyrannical course of irreparable events; a period in which to look round upon the world and upon oneself without the sense of an enemy at one's back or the insistent pressure to make up one's mind; a moment in which to taste the mystery without the necessity of at once seeking a solution. And all this, not in an intellectual vacuum, but surrounded by all the inherited learning and literature and experience of our civilization; not alone, but in the company of kindred spirits; not as a sole occupation, but combined with the discipline of studying a recognized branch of learning; and neither as a first step in education (for those wholly ignorant of how to behave or think) nor as a final education to fit a man for the day of judgement, but as a middle. This interval is nothing so commonplace as a pause to get one's breath; no young man or woman, I take it, would say "Thank you" for an opportunity of that sort; it is not the cessation of activity, but the occasion of a unique kind of activity.

It would be difficult to determine the generation of this remarkable opportunity. Perhaps it sprang (as Lucretius imagines human limbs to have sprung) from there being people who, in varying degrees, could make use of it. At all events, I think it is the one thing that every university in Europe, in some measure, provides for its undergraduates. The enjoyment of it depends upon some previous preparation (no man ignorant of what he should have learned in the nursery could expect to make use of it), but it does not depend on any definable pre-existing privilege or upon the absence of the necessity of earning one's living in the end—it is itself the privilege of being a "student," the enjoyment of *schole*—leisure. One might, hazarding a misunderstanding, reduce this to a doctrine about the character of a university; one might call it the doctrine of the interim. But the doctrine would be no more than a brief expression of what it felt like to be an undergraduate on that first October morning. Almost overnight, a world of ungracious fact had melted into infinite possibility; we who belonged to no "leisured class" had been freed for a moment from the curse of Adam, the burdensome distinction between work and play. What opened before us was not a road but a boundless sea; it was enough to stretch one's sails to the wind. The distracting urgency of an immediate destination was absent, duty no longer oppressed, boredom and disappointment were words without meaning; death was unthinkable. But it belongs to the character of an interim to come to an end; there is a time for everything and nothing should be prolonged beyond its time. The eternal undergraduate is a lost soul.

And what of the harvest? Nobody could go down from such a university unmarked. Intellectually, he may be supposed to have acquired some knowledge, and, more important, a certain discipline of mind, a grasp of consequences, a greater command over his own powers. He will know, perhaps, that it is not good enough to have a "point of view," that what we need is *thoughts*. He will not go down in possession of an armoury of arguments to prove the truth of what he believes; but he will have acquired something that puts him beyond the reach of the intellectual hooligan, and whatever has been the subject of his study he may be expected to be able to look for some meaning in the things that have greatly moved mankind. Perhaps he may even have found a centre for his intellectual affections. In short, this period at a university may not have equipped him very effectively to earn a living, but he will have learned something to help him lead a more significant life. And morally—he will not have acquired an outfit of moral ideas, a new reach-me-down suit of moral clothing, but he will have had an opportunity to extend the range of his moral sensibility, and he will have had the leisure to replace the clamorous and conflicting absolutes of adolescence with something less corruptible.

The pursuit of learning, like every other great activity, is unavoidably conservative. A university is not like a dinghy which can be jiggled about to catch

every transient breath of wind. The critics it should listen to are those who are interested in the pursuit of learning, not those who find a university imperfect because it is not something other than it is. But somehow or other the idea of a university in recent years has got mixed up with notions such as "higher education," "advanced training," "refresher courses for adults"—things admirable in themselves, but really very little to do with a university. And it is time something was done to unravel the confusion. For these ideas belong to a world of power and utility, of exploitation, of social and individual egoism, and of activity, whose meaning lies outside itself in some trivial result or achievement—and this is not the world to which a university belongs; it is not the world to which education in the true sense belongs. It is a very powerful world; it is wealthy, interfering and well-meaning. But it is not remarkably self-critical; it is apt to mistake itself for the whole world, and with amiable carelessness it assumes that whatever does not contribute to its own purposes is somehow errant. A university needs to beware of the patronage of this world, or it will find that it has sold its birthright for a mess of pottage; it will find that instead of studying and teaching the languages and literatures of the world it has become a school for training interpreters, that instead of pursuing science it is engaged in training electrical engineers or industrial chemists, that instead of studying history it is studying and teaching history for some ulterior purpose, that instead of educating men and women it is training them exactly to fill some niche in society.

A university, like everything else, has a place in the society to which it belongs, but that place is not the function of contributing to some other kind of activity in the society but of being itself and not another thing. Its first business is with the pursuit of learning—there is no substitute which, in a university, will make up for the absence of this—and, secondly, its concern is with the sort of education that has been found to spring up in the course of this activity. A university will have ceased to exist when its learning has degenerated into what is now called research, when its teaching has become mere instruction and occupies the whole of an undergraduate's time, and when those who came to be taught come, not in search of their intellectual fortune but with a vitality so unroused or so exhausted that they wish only to be provided with a serviceable moral and intellectual outfit; when they come with no understanding of the manners of conversation but desire only a qualification for earning a living or a certificate to let them in on the exploitation of the world.