

BOOK REVIEW: *CONTEMPORARY
PHILOSOPHICAL PROPOSALS FOR
THE UNIVERSITY*

SETH VANNATTA
Morgan State University



*Contemporary Philosophical Proposals for the University: Toward a
Philosophy of Higher Education.* Aaron Stoller and Eli Kramer, eds.
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Reviewed by Seth Vannatta, Morgan State University
seth.vannatta@morgan.edu



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Only nine years ago I defended a dissertation and took a tenure track job at a public urban research university in a philosophy department. In eight years I have ascended through the ranks of tenure and promotion by publishing articles in peer-reviewed journals and have taught many students many philosophy classes. Yet, only eight years in, I feel like an ancient relic of a past system. Why? Storm clouds loom. A mortgage crises turned financial crises turned state government budget crisis has ended in decreased funding to public higher education. Administrative bloat and governmental aid have contributed to higher tuition and student debt. Thus, enrollment is down two million in the last five years. The radical right thinks humanities education is tantamount to leftist indoctrination, and grant funders and employers seem to chant only “STEM.” Universities turn to online education and accountability/assessment to weather the storm, but departmental and university closures occur all around us. This morning my university’s president sent the faculty an article on how higher education is dying and an indication that we need to do something new to stay alive.

But do what? The editors of this volume refuse go the route of quietistic cynicism. Instead, Aaron Stoller and Eli Kramer bring philosophical tools to bear on the future of higher education and have organized a multi-author volume around the empirical-denotative method of John Dewey. In what follows, I will discuss the book’s organization, the problem (that I glossed above) that the book addresses, and two recurring themes, the university’s relationship to culture and to diversity. Last, I will illustrate the virtues and shortcomings of its last and most engaging chapter, and offer a point of criticism about what the volume lacks. If you care about the future of higher education and are willing to entertain the notion that philosophical inquiry can help guide our thinking about that future, I recommend you get a copy of this well-crafted and timely volume.

The book is explicitly organized and guided by John Dewey’s empirical-denotative method, which insists that philosophical inquiry “start from and terminate in directly experienced subject-matter” (6). Thus, Stoller and Kramer open with a review of the literature

discussing the indeterminacy in higher education and point to the myriad of issues that need serious imaginative reconstruction, including the university's relationship to culture, the institutional structure of the university, the role of the academic in the university and society, and the nature and aims of a university curriculum. Part I is defined as "the problematic situation," as this is the first step in Dewey's pattern of inquiry, the move from indeterminacy to problem. A chapter on the problem of political unanimity in higher education, another on neoliberalism, technology, and the turn to online classes, and a third on thin uses of "diversity" in higher education are well-situated here. Part II includes two chapters reflecting broadly and insightfully on the nature of a liberal education and Michael Oakeshott's understanding of the function of "conversation" in the cultivation of norms necessary to promote a civil association. Part III turns to generalized reconstructions of the university, including chapters on an ecological approach to understanding the relationship between the university and culture, education for citizenship in a global era, and one proposing that the African *telos* of "communion" displace those of "autonomy, truth, and citizenship." Part IV completes the arc of Dewey's pattern of inquiry with a co-authored chapter exposing philosophical approach to transdisciplinary, collaborative, and publicly engaged education and scholarship. Part V looks to future inquiry, bringing Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy to bear on the technological singularity predicted by Ray Kurzweil and other futurists as it pertains to the future of education.

The first recurrent theme I will address involves the notion of diversity. Dwayne Tunstall's chapter offers a much needed critique of thin calls for diversity on college campuses, which amount to institutional marketing functioning as "a veneer to cover over the messy realities on their campuses, especially campuses of predominantly white colleges and universities," including "persisting racial and ethnic disparities in higher education enrollment and attainment, as well as racial and ethnic disparities in earnings, employment, and other social and economic outcomes between white communities and communities of color" (68). As a response, Tunstall offers a less problematic conception of diversity, using the Association

of American Colleges and University's definition as "individual differences (e.g. personality, learning styles, and life experiences) and group/social differences (e.g. race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, country of origin, and ability as well as cultural, political, religious, or other affiliations" (69). This conception means that commitments to diversity are also commitments to inclusion and equity. Tunstall offers pointed condemnations of what happens when the former is extolled and the latter ignored.

Martha Nussbaum is less critical of "the new emphasis on diversity," which she sees as a "way of grappling with the altered requirements of citizenship in an era of global connection, an attempt to produce adults who can function as citizens not just some of the local region or group but also... of a complex interlocking world" (148). Nussbaum's chapter opens with a welcomed historical undermining of conservative demands that education be "an acculturation into the time-honored values of one's own culture" rather than "the new education" which conservatives caricature as "a mono-lithic political elite... attempting to enforce a 'politically correct' view of human life, subverting traditional values" (147). Nussbaum notes that this image is at least as old as Aristophanes's depiction of Socrates in *The Clouds*, and that calls for education to make students more fully "self-aware, self-governing, and capable of recognizing and respecting the humanity of our fellow human beings, no matter where they are born, no matter what social class they inhabit, no matter what their gender or ethnic origin" are as at least as ancient as Seneca (146). Nussbaum notes that democracies are inherently plural, so an education for citizenship necessitates the need for the cultivation of respect across differences, which includes the infusion of world-citizenship perspectives into general and specialized courses in an aim to promote narrative imagination. Her chapter is strengthened by giving two poignant denotative examples of how liberal education has, and therefore can, cultivate these habits of mind.

The second theme, the relationship between a university and culture, follows from the first. Crispin Sartwell gives a concise philosophical history of how "linguistic constructivism" emerged and helped create a culture of "ideological uniformity of universities—

particularly in the humanities and social sciences” (27). This history culminates in Richard Rorty’s nominalism, anti-realism, and relativism, but more importantly in his equation of truth with a certain vision of progressive political consensus. Sartwell sees this as an unfortunate development, and given that this ideological uniformity is a premise in the right wing’s rhetorical argument against the humanities in higher education, his history of its philosophical underpinnings is timely. Ronald Barnett’s chapter expressly takes up the question of the relationship of the university to culture, offering a variety of criticisms of the idea that a university should teach a “unified” set of the ‘great’ symbolic achievements of a society” and that such a set of achievements exists independent of their selection by some empowered group. Much space is given to the potential problem, but Barnett ends by asserting that the concept of culture is “inescapable and essential” (137). The university is itself a culture which makes agential choices its culture and values. His vision of the university exemplifies an “ecological culture,” one of “concern for the world in all of its manifestations” (143). The strength of this chapter is its exposition of a multiplicity of potential relationships between a university and culture. Nonetheless, I was left wondering what big problems his ecological approach helps solve.

The book’s final chapter, its longest, is both challenging philosophically, even to a reader well-read in Whitehead’s process metaphysics, and engaging. In it, Randall Auxier argues that contemporary scientists and scientific journalists are dogmatically attached to mathematical modeling and uncritical at the level of ontology. Auxier uses many of Whitehead’s ideas to help us think about the transition in education from high-entropy (biological) learning to low-entropy (artificially intelligent and post-human) learning. While the walking encyclopedia vision of the professor and the brick and mortar vision of the library will become extinct, or already are, Auxier envisions a role for teaching in post-singularity future, where mass erudition will have replaced mass literacy, a role which guides students in the difference between what is valued more and less and to pass on the enduring standards for that valuation (239).

After many pages of engaging process ontology, we get some

rather optimistic predictions and prescriptions for the future of higher education, some of which I would like to question. Auxier views physical campuses as artifacts of the last two centuries and sees them as unnecessary because of the success of online classes in “content retention,” but this is the very old school purpose future education will not serve. The online model is given its critical due in Chapter 3 of this volume, and I have seen nothing in its current deployment that gives cause for such optimism. Auxier prescribes the decoupling of athletics from higher education, and thinks that college sports should follow the model of baseball, which has a well-functioning minor league. That the marriage of higher education and competitive athletics is silly is not debatable. But Auxier underestimates their sentimental and financial importance to many colleges and universities. Other options, such as turning the sport into a major course of study, are more easily foreseeable and more seamlessly capable of transition than a complete dissociation. I predict that if these continue to bring in revenue for universities, they will persist. When it is empirically shown that they represent a financial burden on universities, they will die out slowly.

I will end with one topic I found missing from the volume, and this involves another of Auxier’s prescriptions. Auxier sees “no natural complementarity between original research and... teaching,” and argues that universities’ focus on research has contributed to killing good teaching (251). In my experience, writing those journal articles not only keeps a mind thinking, and a mind thinking is helpful to good teaching, but keeps a teacher humble and empathic. I find that teachers who drop out of the research game, relieving themselves of the emotional burden of reading scarring reviews from nameless referees, are more likely to write scarring comments on student papers. They have the privilege of being armchair academics, judging all the putatively inferior drivel they grade from a comfortable position of not being judged. That said, if rewarding faculty for research and failing to cultivate excellent, humane teaching, (covered with care in this volume in many chapters I failed to acknowledge), then what about graduate education in the future university? University professors were all trained to be specialist researchers, even in the

humanities, and even for those with PhDs employed in teaching colleges, community colleges, and as lecturers and adjuncts. In addition to the many excellent contributions in this volume, I would have liked to have read one involving Deweyan inquiry into the nature of our PhD programs, their culture, their (lack of) diversity, and their woeful deficiency in education in pedagogy. Do we need to produce so many PhDs, and if not, why do graduate programs persist at their current rate? Do universities need to develop robust “teaching tracks” that decouple research and tenure requirements? These questions deserve exploration in a volume such as this.

I do not want to be an artifact. Reading, writing, and teaching philosophy in a physical classroom with high-entropy, living and breathing students is a profession I want to endure. Some of these problems in higher education surely will pass on their own. Others are wicked, systematic and persistent. Stoller and Kramer have assembled a diverse set of philosophical inquiries into their nature, and they have achieved their aim, offering proposals for a philosophy of higher education and calling on its readers to do the same.