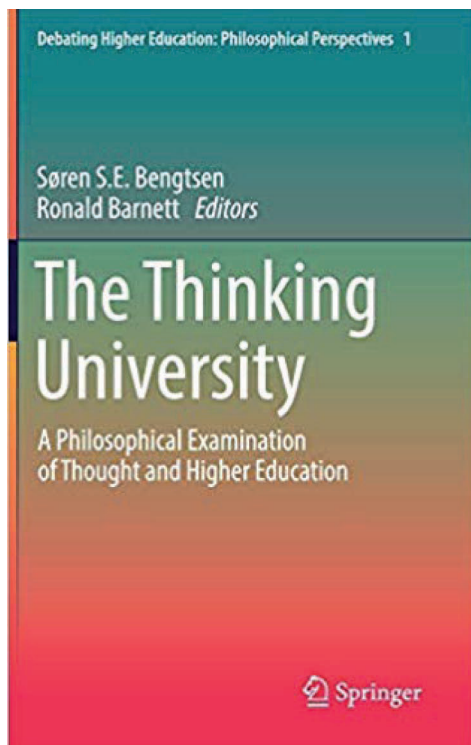


Book review

Sheena Hyland* – *National College of Ireland, Republic of Ireland*

The Thinking University: A philosophical examination of thought and higher education, edited by Ronald Barnett and Søren Bengtson

Cham: Springer; 2018; 200 pp; ISBN: 978-3-030-08507-0 (pbk); ISBN: 978-3-319-77666-8 (hbk); ISBN: 978-3-31-977667-5 (ebk)



The Thinking University is published as the first volume in Springer's *Debating Higher Education: Philosophical perspectives* series. With this collection of essays, Barnett and Bengtson make a valuable contribution to the development of a sustained philosophical approach to the study of higher education. Bringing together a group of international scholars to tackle the question of what it means for the university to be 'a thinking institution', this volume cuts to the defining work and character of the university (p. 1). As public debates and discourses on the value and purpose of higher education are increasingly dominated by narrow political and economic logics, this collection sets out to broaden our understandings of the university as a place for thought and to create more meaningful connections between the academy and the wider world.

Barnett and Bengtson remind us that the university is a remarkable institution. Designed specifically to foster the capacity to think and produce knowledge, the

university holds the potential to ‘inspire, dislodge, amaze, intrigue, lead into both darkness and light, and mesmerise’ (p. 8). The editors open the collection by drawing a conceptual distinction between the *thinking* university, characterized by a collective intellectual disposition that treats the world as an object of study while remaining largely apart from it, and the *thoughtful* university, which is perceived as slower, deeper and more contemplative in nature. Together, these two intellectual modes constitute the work of the university as a space for ‘serious thinking’ – something that Barnett and Bengtson see as inextricably linked to action in the world. They maintain that thought arises from encounters that fascinate and disturb, prompting the desire to ‘solve a conundrum, a problem, a dilemma or an issue ... of whatever kind, be it practical, empirical, theoretical, aesthetic’ (p. 7). Such thinking can lead to the creation of imaginative new frameworks that can positively transform our social, political and environmental realities and ‘build worlds, new worlds, make worlds possible’ (p. 7).

However, as the contemporary university contends with intensifying corporate, managerial and audit cultures, such pressures may have a narrowing effect on academic practices and behaviours that ultimately stifles thinking. Moreover, Barnett warns that in this climate the university’s intellectual resources may be redirected towards ‘interests that lack a care for thought’ (p. 199). While the university today finds itself under immense pressure to maximize its research output while demonstrating impact on the economy, society, culture and environment, there is a real risk that we mistake academic hyperactivity for genuine thoughtfulness and deep engagement with the world. Barnett and Bengtson remind us that, while the university might ‘pride itself on its thinking’, this is ‘not in itself an indication that thinking is present’. To be a thriving intellectual environment, then, the university must be an institution that ‘actively encourages thought’ by creating opportunities for sustained engagement with others both within and beyond its borders (p. 6). The thinking university is thus envisioned as a ‘necessarily relational’ institution that is fundamentally orientated towards the world in terms of both its concerns and its responsibilities (p. 7).

This volume is divided into three parts, with each exploring different dimensions of the relationship between thought, the university and the wider world. Part One, ‘The Thinking University—Contending with the World’, posits the university as central to the liberal democratic project and explores the question of how the *thinking* university can create a better future for others in the world. The university as a site of teaching and learning is explored in Part Two, ‘Educating Thought’, which lays out a vision for educating ‘care-fully’, developing ‘citizen scholars’, and recognizing the place of emotion in our academic institutions, while also highlighting the connections between language and thought, and warning of the potential hollowing out of intellectual richness and diversity in ‘English for academic purposes’ education. Part Three, ‘The Thinking University—Making Connections’, points to how imaginative and emancipatory forms of thought that arise within the university afford the opportunity to radically reimagine a future for the institution that is understood as essentially and resolutely ‘for, in and of the world’ (p. 168). By returning to the defining work of the university as the ‘labour of thought’, the essays in this collection explore the idea of the *thinking* university as an institution that can assist humanity in ushering in a *thinking* world (p. 87). In this vision, the university is recast from that of an insular ivory tower to that of a distinctly worldly institution charged with ‘playing its part in repairing the world’ (p. 8).

The Thinking University examines thought in a manner that opens up imaginative and practical new possibilities for the future of higher education. This is a collection that, while remaining firmly rooted in the many concrete challenges facing the university

and its role in the world, harnesses the conceptual resources afforded by philosophy to propose alternative futures that might enable the university to better meet the needs of the world. Although this is a volume brimming with ideas, the breadth of possibilities and perspectives explored can, at times, feel overwhelming for the reader. Tackling such complex theoretical subject matter is undoubtedly challenging and demands careful reading; yet this collection hinges on the dual concepts of *thinking* and *thought* that could arguably be more fully developed by Barnett and Bengtson in the opening chapter in order to bring about a more cohesive philosophical structure to the volume. *The Thinking University* nonetheless represents a significant achievement in bringing together a host of international scholars to collectively envision preferred futures for the university, understood here as a fundamentally thoughtful and ever-evolving institution.