

## THE UNIVERSITY AS PURPOSE: A MISSION FOR OUR INSTITUTION<sup>1</sup>

*La universidad como propósito. Una misión para nuestra institución*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to update a finalist definition of the university taking into account its social mission. In the initial assessment, this research will consider the qualities, functions and objectives that are specific to the university and so cannot be replaced by other institutions or alternative practices in our society. Therefore, we suggest offering a functional definition for university institutions, preferably non-profit ones, that is based on their purpose. Our research will fundamentally consider data relating to

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the Spanish university system and will favour classical frameworks for contemporary thought to establish the institutional purpose of universities.

Methodologically, we will refer to quantitative data and their sources, although this research aspires to provide a critical reflection, albeit one with an eminently practical vocation. It is, therefore, a reflection articulated from philosophy (or, more generally, from humanities) and not from the social sciences in a strict sense. The theoretical suppositions from which we will start owe a particular debt to Max Weber, Jacques Derrida and, especially, José Ortega y Gasset, although they will also dialogue with more contemporary references such as Anne Applebaum and Jonathan D. Haidt. Likewise, throughout this text, references to classical and medieval philosophy will be incorporated, which we believe can continue to claim objective validity. From these theoretical premises we will try to bring the mission of the contemporary university up to date, underlining its social and cultural implications and claiming a specific political responsibility in the promotion and custody of certain epistemic hierarchies within the framework of a plural and democratic society.

*Keywords:* university; culture; philosophy; pluralism; epistemology.

## RESUMEN

El presente artículo intenta actualizar una definición finalista de la universidad en virtud de su misión social. En su diagnóstico inicial, esta investigación se interrogará por las cualidades, funciones y objetivos que son específicos de la universidad y que, por este motivo, no pueden ser sustituidos por otras instituciones o prácticas alternativas en nuestra sociedad. Proponemos, por ello, brindar una definición funcional y de propósito para las instituciones universitarias, preferentemente aquellas que no tienen ánimo de lucro. Nuestra investigación atenderá, fundamentalmente, a los datos relativos al Sistema Universitario Español y se servirá de marcos preferentemente clásicos del pensamiento contemporáneo en el establecimiento del propósito institucional de las universidades.

Metodológicamente referiremos algunos datos cuantitativos y sus fuentes, aunque este trabajo aspira a proponerse como una reflexión crítica aunque con eminente vocación práctica. Se trata, por lo tanto, de una reflexión operada desde la filosofía (o, más genéricamente, desde las humanidades) y no desde las ciencias sociales en un sentido estricto. Los presupuestos teóricos de los que partiremos adquieren una deuda singular con Max Weber, Jacques Derrida y más específicamente Ortega y Gasset, aunque dialogarán también con referencias más contemporáneas como Anne Applebaum o Jonathan D. Haidt. Asimismo, a lo largo de este texto se incorporarán referencias de la filosofía clásica y medieval que consideramos pueden seguir reivindicando una vigencia objetiva. A partir de estas premisas teóricas intentaremos actualizar la misión de la universidad contemporánea, subrayando sus implicaciones sociales y culturales y su responsabilidad política específica en la promoción y custodia de ciertas jerarquías epistémicas en el marco de una sociedad plural y democrática.

*Palabras clave:* universidad; cultura; filosofía, pluralismo; epistemología.

L'université fait profession de la vérité. Elle  
déclare, elle promet un engagement sans limite  
envers la vérité.

Jacques Derrida, *L'Université sans condition*.

What I now experience  
of retirement from teaching  
Has left me orphaned.

George Steiner, *Lessons of the Masters*.

## 1. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

The university is an exceptional institution. It has many special characteristics, but one of its most marked and distinguishing features is its self-conscious reflection. It could be argued that, since ancient times, and particularly since the emergence of the social sciences in the 19th century, the university has been an entity that, like Aristotle's god, fulfils the singular function of thinking itself (*Met.* XII, 1074b34-5). This self-reflexive nature has acquired an important role in recent years within the area of public debate. The debate over what the university is and should be has transcended the boundaries of academia itself, acquiring its own momentum in the political and media agenda. In the case of the Spanish university system, public debate has become especially visible after each of the legislative reforms that has, in one way or another, tried to update the efficacy and good functioning of universities in Spain.

Since the implementation of the reforms resulting from the Bologna Declaration in 1999, indicators, statistics and protocols for evaluating the quality of university teaching have multiplied. The creation of the European Higher Education Area has driven increased professionalisation in the preparation of data in the university sphere, undoubtedly creating diagnostic and mapping tools that are of great use for university governance and legislation. This paper however, does not aspire to be data-driven research in the strict sense, as is not the place of philosophy to submit to the discipline of quantitative evidence. Nonetheless, this does not mean that it should not take it into consideration.

There are many sources we can turn to for a more or less comprehensive and complex account of the Spanish university system. Spain's Instituto Nacional de Estadística [National Statistics Institute], for example, publishes the *Estadística de Universidades, Centros y Titulaciones* [Statistics on Universities, Centres and Qualifications]<sup>2</sup>. Similarly, the Ministry of Universities publishes annually the *Datos y*

2. These annual statistics make up the *Registro de Universidades, Centros y Titulaciones* [Register of Universities, Centres and Qualifications, RUCT] and are collected through the *Sistema Integrado de Información Universitaria* [Integrated University Information System, SIU].

*Cifras del Sistema Universitario Español* [Data and Figures of the Spanish University System], a summary centred on the (organisational and economic) structure, access, students and staff of Spain's universities. The report by CRUE [the Association of Principals of Spanish Universities] *La Universidad Española en Cifras* [The Spanish University in Figures] has been published since 1996. This is a document that not only sets out but also interprets data that are of value and interest for appraising the reality of Spain's universities. Furthermore, other projects like the Informe CYC report (promoted by the Fundación Conocimiento y Desarrollo [Knowledge and Development Foundation]) offer us very valuable instruments for analysing the different tasks undertaken in the university framework. There are, also, initiatives from the private sector that specifically cater to the field of R&D where, again, very interesting data can be found to provide information about the current state of the university in Spain<sup>3</sup>.

I believe however, that the specific utility that philosophy – and the humanities in general – can offer does not so much relate to the interpretation of data as the establishment of critical and hermeneutic keys that allow us to elucidate, diligently and responsibly, the meaning and scope of these indicators. Philosophy can only interpret a set of statistics or records clumsily and it would only very inexactly be able to explain whether a percentage is decisive for the fulfilment of the purpose of Spanish universities. Insofar as philosophy is an essentially theoretical discipline, however, it can and must unlock what the mission of the university could – or even should – be and what traits should strengthen the fulfilment of this goal within the framework of civil society and in the public interest. For this reason, in the research that follows, references to quantitative data will be merely secondary and serve to support a theoretical and finalistic reflection on the university as an institution. For the same reason, in this paper, classical sources from the philosophical canon will be interspersed with contemporary publications that can help support our conclusions.

The theoretical framework of this research will be decidedly definitional and finalistic, underlining how this paper will set out to define what the university is and what it should be in the post-pandemic social and political setting. This definition will, in turn, be shaped by the purpose and goal we identify for the university. In the same way, we will ask ourselves about what obstacles and opportunities might hinder or favour this mission. The purpose is not only not new but it combines with a strictly classical methodological framework. So, thanks to Aristotle, we know that the definition of any object or institution can be determined by its *telos*, or purpose, summarising an insight he explained at the start of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. This same finalistic description (what the university is and should be is shaped by its

3. In this regard, at the journal *Índice* (INE-UAM [National Statistics Institute–Universidad Autónoma de Madrid]) in 2016 we published two monographic issues (numbers 69 and 70) that set out to offer a more or less panoramic sample of the body of statistical sources relating to innovation and research.

mission and purpose) obliges us to enter into a very close dialogue with a text from 1930 by José Ortega y Gasset, *Misión de la Universidad* [Mission of the University]. As well as this source, which is the main one with which we will enter discussions, we will consider two essential milestones for philosophical reflection on the reality of universities: *The Future of the Profession or the University without condition (thanks to the "Humanities," what could take place tomorrow)* by Jacques Derrida, delivered in 1998 at Stanford University (California), and the lecture given at the University of Munich by Max Weber in 1917 "Science as a Vocation".

## 2. THEORETICAL PRECEDENTS

The institutionalisation of knowledge has long been an object of prime reflection for philosophers. It is widely known today that when we speak about academy, it is a term that comes from the centre of learning that Plato founded in the late 4th century BC. He established the original school from which so many institutions would later take their name in the gardens dedicated to Akademos (Kalligas, Balla & Baziotopoulou-Valavani, 2020, p. 30). Philosophy has constantly examined how the administration and diffusion of knowledge should be ritualised and universities and scientific societies alike owe more than a little to purely philosophical reflection.

In the current climate, philosophy has a somewhat ambiguous epistemic status. On the one hand, people who dedicate themselves professionally to philosophical thought enjoy a certain social prestige<sup>4</sup>, which means that the voice of philosophy has a healthy presence in public debate. In strictly scientific settings, and given the marked interdisciplinary vocation with which research is planned, especially in Europe, philosophy in particular and the humanities in general are enjoying a new prominence<sup>5</sup>. Nonetheless, institutional reflection on the university and knowledge has stayed within the framework of methodologies and protocols that are closer to the social sciences than to humanities.

There is no doubt that pedagogical, sociological, and even economic and strictly statistical research have much to offer when evaluating the challenges and opportunities of the university as an educational, cultural and research institution. However, I believe that the set of questions inscribed in these disciplines still requires

4. The change in social perception of philosophy has become so clear that even the general media has noted this fact. One example is the recent article by Juanjo Becerra "Por qué la cuarta revolución industrial ha puesto de moda la filosofía: cinco años de aumento de matriculaciones tras 30 de caída" [Why the fourth industrial revolution has made philosophy fashionable: five years of increased enrolment after 30 years of decline]. *EL MUNDO*, 30/01/2022. <https://www.elmundo.es/tecnologia/innovacion/working-progress/2022/01/30/61f552d5fdddffa0a48b457e.html>

5. So, for example, the explicit mention of the humanities in the priorities relating to social challenges is affirmed. See COM/2011/0808 Horizon 2020. Spanish version available at <https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/horizon2020/en/official-documents>.

the radical and panoramic approach that philosophy provides. Although these two traits might seem contradictory, I believe it is justified to maintain that these two approaches are not just compatible but are constitutive of the discipline of philosophy. I invoke a panoramic overview as it is the broad or general condition – Aristotle noted that there is only science of the general (*Met.*, XIII, 1086 and *passim*) – that can give us a comprehensive perspective of, in our case, the university. I underline the radical condition, in Ortega’s sense of the word, as only an examination that goes to the root of the concepts involved will be able to resolve in a satisfactory way the questions that inspired this paper.

To put it in a simpler but possibly even more categorical way: I do not believe that any political, pedagogical, economic or social question relating to the university can be resolved if we do not confront, with all of the radicalism available to us, an unequivocally metaphysical question, however off-putting this term might be. The question of the future of the university could not even be approached without first trying to unravel what the university is, what it should be, what it could be. All of these questions could be answered if we were capable, at least of outlining, something as labile, elusive and fragile as the “being” of the university. The superlative or even irresolvable aspects of this question should not stop us persisting in our attempt to answer it. And given the modest capacities of the writer, here I can do no more than use authoritative arguments that others have provided and that, if not definitive, are perfectly achieved.

So what is the university? This question seems so immediately straightforward that we might feel like Saint Augustine of Hippo with the question of the nature of time (*Conf.* XI, 14, 17): if nobody asks the question, the answer seems obvious, but if we are obliged to offer a specific definition of what the university might be, the question seems almost impossible to answer. This very question is the one that Ortega in a way tried to answer in his “Mission of the University” lecture, mentioned above, which was delivered in the main hall of the Universidad Central in 1930 (Ortega, 2017, pp. 531–570)<sup>6</sup>. Nobody can be unaware of the very exceptional circumstances in which Ortega spoke, nor the socio-politically critical condition of the decade in which the thinker from Madrid spoke his words. Despite everything, and this is a worryingly common feature of all of the literature of that time, the continued relevance and currency of the questions of that time and of the answers is undeniable. Many pages by Ortega and many others by authors such as Julio Camba and Clara Campoamor or foreign authors like Stefan Zweig could be published now and still seem perfectly current.

6. On 9 October 1930, by invitation of the Federación Universitaria Escolar student group, Ortega gave a lecture with the title of “Sobre la reforma universitaria” [On university reform]. The poor acoustic conditions in which this lecture was given meant that a more complete version of it was published in *El Sol* in seven instalments. The final version, with the title we cite, was composed in December of that year (Ortega, 2017, p. 880).

One of the strengths of Ortega's proposal, before unpacking what in its content might be of use, is the identification of the very being of the university with its mission. Even in the corporate world, it is not unusual nowadays to hear talk of capitalism with a purpose and public presentations relating to the mission of the institutions are common, often taking shape in strategic plans, compliance with which is the object of quantification. Nonetheless, the set of data that form the basis of how we map the reality of our universities would be wholly unintelligible if we did not first know how to recognise the mission or purpose that our institution should take as its own.

This proposal for a teleological definition, in other words, one that characterises an entity on the basis of its purpose, on occasion reproduces an explicitly Aristotelian strategy that still functions. Things (all things, as well as practices or actions, according to Aristotle) can be defined by their purpose (*telos*), which in turn is described by the specific function (*ergon*) and by the good of the thing we try to define. Applying this to the university, the mission or aim of institutions would be described by the service, action, activity or function that only the university can fulfil. To put it very simply: just as a knife is defined by its purpose (cutting) and that this purpose is distinguished by being that which only a knife can do (or that which the knife does best), the mission of the university institution is described by the activity that it can, in practice, solely do. This criterion for demarcation will enable us to differentiate university activity from any other institutions linked to knowledge, formal teaching, or research that cannot properly be described as universities. At a time when corporations like Google issue certificates and when private agents offer training courses in different formats and with varying levels of training and accreditation, asking ourselves about the mission of the university seems to be essential.

This question is not trivial and it is one of the elements that can best help us to update the mission of the university. In a context of global data storage and virtualisation of human experience, the university must fulfil a mission and a specific function. One of the first difficulties we encounter when defining the university is that this general and unanimous abstraction predictably does not exist. In the 2019–2020 academic year, 3008 bachelor's degrees and 3638 master's programmes were taught in Spain, to a total of 1,309,762 students. That year, there were 83 active universities: 50 public and 33 private, a number that has now increased to 38. A total of 1,061 university centres across schools and faculties, 537 university research institutions, 50 doctoral schools, 54 university hospitals and 76 foundations have been identified<sup>7</sup>. Data so eminently complex and pluralistic could lead us to give up on the attempt to provide a single or even unanimous definition of what the nature of the university as an institution should be. This challenge, incidentally, was already

7. Figures from Spain's Ministry of Universities (2021).



known by Plato when he accepted the inherent complexity that was expressed in the phenomenon of using one word to attempt to name various things.

I think, despite everything, that the attempt is unavoidable and so, as stated above, I will appeal to authority as a transitory solution. As Jacques Derrida notes: “The university professes the truth, and that is its profession. It declares and promises an unlimited commitment to the truth” (2002, p. 10). This definition could seem too ambitious or for many could even be seen as another expression of the excesses of the Franco-Algerian thinker. At a time when truth appears to be rejected and disputed and when post-truth seems to roam unhindered, invoking an expression as archaic as professing the truth, and even possible commitment, would become unacceptable for many. There is, however, very little that is unusual about the definition. For example, on the coat of arms of Harvard, which is the world’s most prestigious university according to the rankings, we can see an invocation of the truth in its Latin form: *ve-ri-tas*.

This fact does not seem at all secondary to me and it will be discussed below. It is obvious that truth is one of the most complex and disputed concepts in all of the history of epistemology, but its centrality and protagonism in the work of universities already determines something in the absence of a definition of the concept that could be classed as definitive: the university’s ultimate commitment as an institution, and its condition as a sovereign body, should always involve the search for, promotion of and custody of real truth. It would be all but impossible to define what such a truth is, but it seems clear that, in its most radical condition, the university must, in accordance with the Derridean *dictum*, have a commitment to some form of truth, whatever this might mean. Furthermore, as we read in *The future of the profession or the university without condition*, the university as an institution is the place where this truth is professed; it distinguishes itself as the space where a public profession of this commitment is made. There is no need to be a skilled etymologist to detect that the position and work of the professor, has its origin in this professing. A professor is, by definition, someone who professes a special faith in knowledge. Derrida himself notes this and this feature has a connotation that is no less important: according to the Oxford dictionary, until 1300 there was no non-religious use of the term “profession”. This date is no coincidence as it is when the medieval university emerged (2002, p. 32).

The radicalism of Derrida’s words is not without a certain poetic hyperbole and beyond the emphatic style, or the degree of agreement that we could demonstrate with regards to this postulate, his statement seems to underline some common and recognisable features of university campuses. For example, one of the most specific distinguishing features of the university is the way in which a connection is established between tradition and innovation in the light of the solemnity attributed to true knowledge. Much of the work of universities is dedicated to research and innovation, particularly in public universities. Nonetheless, this commitment to the



creation of knowledge and scientific innovation and advancement is harmonised in university practice with a set of rituals and positions with a very strong classical inspiration. Even today we can still observe bodies and activities such as senates, councils, seminars, colleges and so on in the functioning of universities. These terms are all explicitly classicist if not religious in origin. The importance of ritual processes, ceremonies and rites of passage underline this professional condition, in the sense Derrida underlined, of university work.

### **3. A PRELIMINARY FRAGILITY: THE DIGNITY AND PRECARIY OF THE INSTITUTION**

The array of dignities we have just described and the solemnity with which the rites of the university are fortunately still protected illustrate the almost sacred position that our societies still accord to knowledge. In some way, these processes reflect the secular status of Spain's universities and they somehow return to the spirit that is the heir to the scientific societies that developed from the first Enlightenment. Universities on both sides of the Atlantic conserve a remote trace of worship of the goddess of reason who in the 18th century inspired the revolutionary zeal. In this way, while still being recognised as strictly civil institutions in most cases, Western universities play a symbolic, unifying and ritual role at the heart of our societies.

This fact could seem like a more or less remote inheritance or a barely revealing feature of the history of institutions. However, this collection of exclusive characteristics comprises vital ingredients for understanding how careers in teaching and research are still conceived today, for good and ill. It will escape nobody's attention that one of the most explicit weaknesses of the contemporary Spanish university system is the precarity and instability of the professional career. Until the most recent convocation for post-doctoral grants and contracts (December 2021), it was quite normal in Spain for brilliant researchers to have to string together temporary contracts for ten years after completing their doctoral theses. This meant that the best imaginable researcher after completing a doctorate, might not find a stable contract until after the age of 35 in Spain's university system. There is no need to be a professional psychologist to foresee what the consequences of precarity like this might be in a person's life. This scenario would also change little if our imaginary researcher was fortunate enough to be able to compete for an entry-level position as an assistant professor, since in most cases after a doctorate, accreditation and competitive exams, this person will have a contract earning around 1,400 euros a month for five years.

These figures are not just another feature of the university system. Instead they represent the material conditions under which academic work is done. The academic career, far from having been professionalised and turned into an attractive career option for people who, through their effort, merit and capacity, decide to dedicate their efforts to the task of teaching and research, still maintains a certain almost

religious air that puts it half way between a vocation and martyrdom. The reference to martyrdom might seem exaggerated but I believe it is perfectly applicable to our work, since in many circumstances the decision to undertake a research career involves almost completely renouncing elements vital to achieving a reasonably happy or well-lived life.

With regard to vocation, a term that is also charged with religious implications, the reflections Max Weber made in around 1917 in “Science as a Vocation” are very telling. Describing science as a vocation is another example of how the work of teaching and research involves suppositions that are almost religious in inspiration. The call to destiny with which the *vocatio* recruits young researchers would be reason enough to dedicate a life to this professional activity which we already described as a profession of faith, in Derrida’s words. Again, it is surprising how relevant and current the words Weber set down more than a century ago are when we read something we could consider to be perfectly contemporary: “it is extremely hazardous for a young scholar without funds to expose himself to the conditions of the academic career” (1967, p. 181). Weber’s claim fits perfectly with the economic uncertainty that our young researchers have to face. Furthermore, the strange, and sometimes even extravagant ways in which professional merits are evaluated in academic careers again justifies the caution with which Weber attempts to warn those who decide to serve the scientific vocation. “Do you,” he asks an imagined young researcher, “in all conscience believe that you can stand seeing mediocrity after mediocrity, year after year, climb beyond you, without becoming embittered and without coming to grief?”. Nobody can ignore the fact that this same question should be seen as relevant in the contemporary university and no questionnaire is needed to establish that, in effect, many colleagues in the profession would agree without too many doubts that this risk is one of the most common sources of frustration and misfortune in academia.

In my opinion, in spite of everything, Spanish universities have improved greatly in recent decades in transparency, governance and accountability. The implementation of blind and objective accreditation processes as well as the publication of the criteria for recognition of six-year research cycles and other teaching and research accomplishments have reduced the outlook of uncertainty and unpredictability in promotion and stabilisation. Nonetheless, these criteria are minimum guarantees and they barely scratch the individual uncertainty that research staff face. In this regard, I believe we can undoubtedly recognise that the academic career can join the group of professions in which the weight of the vocation undermines fair pay for the work, as Remedios Zafra diagnosed in the case of the creative professions.

In *El entusiasmo. Precariedad y trabajo creativo* (2017) [Enthusiasm: precarity and creative work] Zafra set out with extraordinary clarity some of the contemporary types of servitude that result from excess enthusiasm in the creative professions,

among which we could include the academic career, even if by analogy. In this way, something that in other contexts has been expressed in a form as coarse as non-financial pay, is one of the elements that has most contaminated the full professionalisation of research as a career. In this text, where Zafra dedicates a specific chapter to the new epistemic and employment servitudes of academia, the inversely proportional relationship between vocational careers (and careers of passion) and the employment guarantees they offer are set out very precisely. So, a lack of stability, discontinuous contracts, being subject to rigid and sometimes artificial mechanisms for monitoring and measuring achievements or the deliberate informality in which much research work is done would find an intangible but sufficient remuneration through the fulfilment of the passion and vocation to justify conditions that contrast very explicitly with what a wholly professionalised university should require.

#### 4. THE MISSION OF THE UNIVERSITY

The contrast between the apparent social prestige of the university as an institution and the precarious conditions in which teachers and researchers exercise their profession is not solely of occupational interest or of interest to members of the profession. The unpredictability of the academic *cursus honorum* not only harms the well-being and legitimate expectations of academics but it also determines how knowledge is produced, transmitted and evaluated. Taking care of science requires taking care of the people who do science, and the custody, cultivation and transmission of knowledge is one of the signs that best illustrate the health of a political community. Nonetheless, the fact that the expression “scientific production” has become naturalised today shows, without any dissimulation, that the productive paradigm has gone to regulating our relationship with different knowledges. We should recall the ambitious words with which Jacques Derrida defined the work of the university and let us take charge of the great divide between the social projection of the university and its material reality.

Although the precarious conditions we have barely started to describe are fundamental, the university cannot and should not define itself by the employment circumstances of teaching and research staff. Because the academic vocation is not merely a trade and when it is described as a profession in the strict sense, in other words publicly professing a vocation, the university should bring its mission up to date to make its future challenges explicit. In this regard, and returning to a classical source, as we noted above, few reflections are as valid as the one Ortega made in 1930. As in the case of Weber, the words spoken as a lecture were later published to conserve the diagnosis of the thinker from Madrid.

Ortega’s reflection still displays a degree of inertia inherited from the famous debate initiated in 1876 relating to science in Spain. However, the value of the new analysis was that it brought up to date the mission of the university as an

institution based on the planning of its reforms. So, Ortega's ambition was to achieve a university reform that went beyond the desire to undo abuses to manage to shape a new institutional framework. This vocation has, in our days, acquired a singular pertinence as following the implementation of the Bologna Plan and as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic, the debate about the transition and transformation of universities again occupies centre stage in political debate in Spain.

Returning to the teleological framework, Ortega noted that "the root of university reform is in completely fulfilling its mission" [own translation], a standpoint that should move us when defining the aim of the university as an institution, before entering into in any transformation (digital or of any other type). Nowadays we know that the university is an enormously complex, plural and even changing institution, but the two major pillars around which its activity revolves remain exactly the same as in the time of Weber: teaching and research (with the new addition of scientific transfer as a complementary mission). These activities cannot, however, be described as pure aims, since their definition will owe a debt to the social aim they aspire to satisfy. While Aristotle started the first book of the *Metaphysics* by appealing to the need to know for the sake of knowing (*Met.* I 1 980 a 20), in a gesture that art would proclaim centuries later in autotelic slogans such as *ars gratia artis* or *l'art pour l'art*, a socially responsible analysis of the institutionalisation of knowledge requires us to recognise clearly what the social, human and maybe even humanitarian, function of the university is.

Knowledge can very rarely be defined as an end in itself, as the self-referentiality of science would prevent us from making decisions about what is worth knowing or what it is worth the effort to teach. Ortega sensed an economic provision in the management and administration of knowledge that is worth retrieving: the attention, human resources and of course economic resources with which the development of science is promoted, are in our time finite by necessity. The administration of these scarce goods are what imprint an economic (but not economicist) logic on scientific and university discussion on the scientific and university deliberation. We cannot, as the Goddess of Parmenides (2007) invites us to do, know everything nor teach everything. The *omnia docet*, still visible on the coat of arms of the Collège de France, has proven to be impossible and projects as radical as the ones that inspired the *Encyclopédie*, namely, the attempt to compile all available human knowledge, would today seem astonishingly ingenuous. Knowledge as a whole is unattainable for an institution and any person who has taken on managerial responsibilities in a university will know that they usually involve choosing certain research lines, methodologies, or objects over others. Deciding what is worth knowing, why some lines should be privileged over others, or prioritising in time the degree of investment in different innovation pathways are always options that are exercised on a finalist universe that brings us back to Ortega's initial question: What is the mission of the university?

## 5. TEACHING OR RESEARCH?

Ortega proposes a mission that is urgent in democratic terms but is scientifically problematic when he underlines how the ultimate beneficiary of the university's work should be the average person. Public institutions, he observes, take the average person as their measure. It is very significant that someone who built part of his fame by predicting a rebellion of the masses would simultaneously underline the university's commitment to the average condition. The tension between excellence and the average, or between the cutting edge and the majority, is something that still affects how the university is conceived. On the one hand, and it seems rather obvious, Spain's network of public universities has a specific commitment to the process of training and cultural development of its population. Indeed this mission is in line with Spain's constitution (Art. 27). Universities, especially public ones, not only benefit their students as recipients of a service but also, in a democratically structured community where political decisions aim to represent the interests of the majority, training citizens is a sort of epistemological guarantee and a social elevator that generates global benefits. However, this legitimate egalitarian commitment, does not make it less realistic to recognise that limiting academic and educational requirements to a level the majority can achieve would hold back the advance of research and academic performance of the most outstanding minority. The conclusions set out by Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* would be perfectly applicable to the field of education and research on this point. Guaranteeing minimum levels can sometimes sacrifice manifestations of excellence.

Ortega set out to resolve this difficulty by dividing the mission of the university into three aims. Accordingly, he underlined that one of the purposes of the university as an institution would be teaching intellectual professions, a second would be research and a third would be cultural transfer. With regard to the first, there is no doubt that the professionalising mission is unavoidable, even though its weight, or even the prominence that Ortega claims it should have, would require a profound redefinition in our time. It is not the aim of this research to quantify the transformations that should take place in the university to adapt to this new and changing employment situation, but it does seem necessary to concede that the university neither can nor should simply be a tool for professional training. The proliferation of external certifications and new continuous training platforms compete with and will even come to complement much of university teaching. The university cannot merely be regarded as an institution that issues professional accreditations but, at the same time its social utility cannot be understood without the partial exercise of something very similar to this function.

One of the most meaningful contributions of Ortega's diagnosis, which would mark a natural difference with some contemporary habits in universities, is his categorical distinction between research and teaching. In opposition to the habitual

profile of the research career in Spain, which combines teaching and research, Ortega's claim is categorical in this regard: "Science in its strict sense, that is scientific research, does not immediately and necessarily belong to the primary functions of the university nor is it simply connected to them" (2017, p. 551, [own translation]). To put it very briefly, we could state that for Ortega there would be a perfectly discrete division between the creation and transfer of knowledge. As Weber himself noted, and as we have all sometimes been able to confirm, a good teacher can be a bad researcher and vice versa. This statement might be controversial on many European campuses, but it would be somewhat more acceptable in an academic context like that of the USA. Indeed, in the USA it is common to distinguish between universities with a research mission and colleges whose essential mission lies in teaching. In any case, and this is an important piece of information that a vision of the university along the lines of Ortega's would have to debate, it is true that almost all of the universities that occupy the top places in the classifications in the USA are institutions classified as R1 (Research One) in the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education. In other words, the most prestigious universities are those that combine teaching and research.

Ortega's proposal set out to resolve one of the tensions inherent to any description of the university in terms of public and social utility. Aligning the purpose of generalist universities on the one hand that can be directed at the normal citizen and on the other a research mission and the creation of academic excellence is certainly a complex undertaking with traces even of being contradictory. Any university institution must know if it is aimed at the 0.1% with the best academic performance or whether it aspires to include more than 10% of the population. Depending on its target public and the degree of detail of this mission, it could direct its activity in one direction or another. Similarly, the budget each university allocates to areas linked to research is discretionary and each institution sets its own scientific policy independently. It seems obvious, in any case, that the growing rigour and competitive condition of research would not fit coherently with a growing universalisation of university education.

Research in Spain largely depends on universities, although the public research system does include alternatives to university-based research activity in other institutions such as the CSIC [the Higher Council for Scientific Research], national centres like the CNIO [Spanish National Cancer Research Centre], or various regional institutes (Ikerbasque in the Basque Country, Icrea in Catalonia, the IMDEAs [Madrid Institutes for Advanced Studies] in the Madrid Region, and so on). In addition, there are private or business initiatives. Again, it is beyond the capacity of this work to decide how much Spain's scientific policy should be subordinated to the exclusively university policy. Both outlooks, the purely university and the country's general research, necessarily work together and the way in which the design of this cooperation is established can allow complex variables. Moreover, a new possibility

for cooperation between states and institutions should be added to this challenge, such as inter-university networks or alliances such as CIVIS or the Alianza 4U. The multitude of research programmes in the framework of the European Commission provide another relevant piece of data when integrating strategies that transcend jurisdiction and national strategy. This type of initiative inaugurates new administrative, executive and institutional frameworks for innovative development of teaching and university activity, but to be able to quantify in terms of success or failure the pending reforms, we should generate a clear outlook on the objectives being attempted.

In any case, and it is only fair to acknowledge it, Ortega's description of research as an independent purpose could be perfectly coherent with how university activity is carried out today. So, despite underlining an essential difference between teaching and research roles, Ortega concludes that the university requires coexistence in intimate community with the "encampments" (2017, p. 566, [own translation]) that the sciences should establish in proximity with the university. Nothing prevents us from recognising that this metaphor, that has more or less been achieved, could be compared with how teaching and research are related in academia nowadays. Beyond the specific details or merits of Ortega's diagnosis there is no doubt that the porous boundary between both of these fundamental undertakings and how this frontier between teaching and knowledge creation is administered will for decades remain one of the most delicate areas of planning and governance in universities.

## **6. CONCLUSION: UPDATING GOALS**

We live in a narcissistic age. We attribute an Adamic and foundational nature to virtually all of the political and social challenges we face. Late modernity insists on thinking about itself as an exceptional time and the pulse of our time seems to demand that every minute is transcendent and crucial. This is no different in universities or in almost any other institutional setting. I believe, however, that there are good reasons for believing that this belief in the uniqueness of the present has something of vanity and is not well rooted in reality. Reviewing classic sources such as the texts by Weber and Ortega shows us that almost all times resemble each other and that many of the problems and challenges that we believe are strictly contemporary had already been formulated a century ago. At least.

The problems are almost always the same although the solutions require novel approaches and nuances in each circumstance and each time. In this regard, I think that the third and final mission that Ortega identifies for the university should stand out as a priority over coming decades. As well as training professionals and research, Ortega emphasised the cultural importance of the university. He warns that "Culture is the system of living ideas each age possesses. ... The system of ideas from which the age lives" (2017, p. 555, [own translation]). Even when the very definition of



culture could be modified there is no doubt that among the many functions that we can recognise in academia there is an essentially cultural mission. The university is a scientific, educational and regulatory institution but it is also essentially cultural, as only in it are knowledge and disciplines taken care of that would not survive in a free market. Perhaps this is why virtually all elite universities are either public or non-profit institutions.

The university, in its position as the guarantor of certain epistemic authorities, exercises roles of cultural and critical conservation, discerning a relationship of judgement and comparison between ideas. This characterisation of epistemic authority will, I believe, be essential in coming years. In a context of proliferation of data and massive information storage, it seems clear that the task of knowledge conservation will, to a great extent, cease to be exclusively or preferentially the mission of the university. Nonetheless, information is something very different from knowledge and it is in this distinction that university authority will be able to find a purpose of renewed social utility. The overabundance of data requires us to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information, and distinguish the direction and sense research must propose for itself, and what sources can be regarded as legitimate or illegitimate when informing ourselves. These risks are as contemporary as the “infoxication” that Alfons Cornellá (Cornellá, 2004) discussed and the proliferation of hoaxes and fake news also seems to urge us to rehabilitate sources, methods and authorities that allow us not only to discern between true and false knowledge but, also, between relevant and irrelevant information.

In 1994 Harold Bloom published his celebrated text *The Western Canon*, in which he criticised, with acerbic irony, how the school of resentment’s insistence on overturning the traditional canon of literary studies in light of political and moral causes. His diagnosis was undoubtedly visionary given what would come later. At the same time, the extraordinary book *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*, by J. D. Haidt and G. Lukianoff (which returns to a paper by these authors published in *The Atlantic* in 2015), sets out and denounces, backed by considerable statistical evidence, the way in which cancel culture, a lack of criticism and a lack of pluralism have weakened the prestige and quality of US universities. The rise of informal censorship processes, the dismissal of professors and the cancellation of events that are perfectly rigorous from an academic viewpoint are undoubtedly worrying signs for those of us who continue to believe in universities as spaces of liberty. In Spain similar cases of censorship have also occurred, such as that suffered by professor Pablo de Lora (chair in Philosophy of Law at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid<sup>8</sup>) or the attacks on stalls of constitutionalist students in Catalonia. The

8. This incident led to the subsequent publication of the book by P de Lora (2021). *El laberinto del género* [The labyrinth of gender].

bad thing about these cases is that they show, once again, that totalitarianism is an all too human temptation or, as Anne Applebaum noted, referring in turn to Hannah Arendt (Applebaum, 2021, p. 11), a type of personality that does not distinguish between left or right. Nonetheless, the fact that this type of incident happens in a university is relevant because they show that university campuses continue to be a territory of the vanguard and of cultural dispute.

It is not the aim of this research to untangle the academic genealogy of cancel culture. There are enough studies on this matter that provide detailed examinations of complex and plausible hypotheses, linking this expression of intolerance with planned misinformation (Rauch, 2021). The existence of this phenomenon does remind us, despite everything, that the university's essentially cultural goal is still apparent among its many missions. In the framework of liberal democracy, and in a context of heterogeneous and happily plural societies, the university must bring its cultural responsibility up to date by protecting precisely those values that make us recognisable as a society. If the essence of the university is determined by what it alone can do, then it is clear that academia is the place that should take care of where expressions of culture and knowledge that despite being deficient fulfil a social and even republican function in its most classical sense. For this reason, it does not (or should not) matter how many students of Syriac or Akkadian there are in our university system since it seems clear that the existence of teachers and researchers who dedicate their lives to the study of classical but minority sources is a symptom of cultural ambition.

Too often people insist on justifying the utility of philosophy by its capacity to formulate questions. I honestly believe that this is a narcissistic luxury that should be banished from universities. For this reason, and in light of what is set out in this paper, I believe we can conclude by accepting this brief list of missions that could be of use for planning how some of the imminent challenges that Spain's universities will face in the coming decades should be confronted.

The first of them, and for this reason it is mentioned in isolation, concerns the increased precarity of academic careers. The disappearance of the middle classes from teaching and research staff is based on a polarisation between precarious workers and excellent scientists and will, undoubtedly, reduce the quality of our teaching and also ordinary coexistence in society. These material conditions are also unquestionable proof of the value that our society gives to the university where social recognition and prestige are not only reduced but also disputed. In addition, we consider that the university and knowledge cannot be described in autotelic or self-referential terms. That is to say, the university must establish its mission and its aim as an institution at the same time as explicitly determining the specific aims towards which science and knowledge should be directed. As teaching and knowing everything is impossible, in terms of aims, it is important to prioritise the

purpose (social, political and cultural) towards which different areas of knowledge should be directed.

Finally, we believe that Ortega's diagnosis remains perfectly valid; the university should maintain a specific commitment to training professionals, to research and to the culture of each time. The third of these missions is, perhaps, the one that should be updated most ambitiously at the present time. In a situation where information and data are multiplying, the guidance that the university can offer as an epistemic authority should be vital in social terms. Similarly, in an increasingly polarised context, like the one we live in, defending and promoting ideological and cultural pluralism should be an area for urgent action for all universities.

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