What is it to understand the university? The university is a social institution, and it is also a set of concepts (there is a literature on the idea of the university extending back over two hundred years). These two domains—the university qua institution and qua idea—have been in interaction, not to say tension, across the decades. Is an adequate understanding of the university, then, to rest on the relationship between the university qua institution and the university qua idea? It would certainly be that, but it would be more, and in two directions.

On the one hand, it has to move into the depths—as we might term it—of the university qua institution; it has to form a sense of the deep structures that underlay it; its ontology indeed. But, on the other hand, it needs also to move upwards – to call upon an old-fashioned metaphor of ascent, even into metaphysical realms, to glimpse the universal ideas that give meaning to the very institution that we term 'university'. So a picture of the university as residing in multiple and vertical frames emerges.

But there is a further complication. For we find, on inspection, both within and across its planes, tensions and conflicts. The university is marked both by negativities and yet by possibilities.

A crucial task, therefore, in understanding the university is disinterestedly both to identify its negativities but also to open its possibilities. Understanding the university is not only a creative task but it is also, in a way, a revolutionary task.

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