***World Philosophy Day***

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**Back to the Future: Reflections on the Idea of the University**

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**The emergence of the ‘blockchain university’**

Universities are rarely out of the news, be it in terms of tuition fees, the student mental health crisis, grade inflation or vice chancellors’ pay. Universities are under fire, and the higher education sector is under significant pressure. So the establishing of a new university is a relatively rare occurrence One recent exception is Woolf University - initiated by academics from the University of Oxford - which states that it: ‘seeks to provide students anywhere in the world with a one-to-one education in the Oxford tradition of personal tutorials’. In imagining a different kind of university, Woolf embraces the possibilities afforded by developments in technology, particularly blockchains and smart contracts to guarantee relationships between students and educators.

Woolf’s use of blockchain - a system that underpins transactions made in bitcoin or another cryptocurrency - simply allows a list of linked records (digital information or blocks) to be stored in a public database (the chain). The rationale is clear: blockchain can automate administrative processes and reduce overhead costs. The smart contracts on the Woolf blockchain will dramatically reduce the need for a traditional university’s administrative staff. The Woolf platform is designed to reduce bureaucracy, lower tuition costs, secure teaching salaries, and increase the time that students interact with their professors. As the frontpage of Woolf’s website proudly acknowledges: it is made for academics and for students.

Woolf proudly announces that it is ‘Not your typical university’. Teaching through 1:1 tutorials, much in the style of the Oxford tutorial beloved of many of its founding members, Woolf students learn by talking with an academic expert. Their aims are laudable and reflect the same kinds of sentiments that we have become accustomed to seeing in many university mission statements. Woolf seeks to instil values of curiosity, intellectual discipline, and clarity of expression. They also claim: ‘At Woolf, we're passionate about transformative education. We know that it changes lives’, but add that such an education is transformative by virtue of the fact that ‘students can talk directly with professors’.

But what *is* Woolf? It uses the language of ‘university’ and ‘college’ (terms familiar to the higher Education sector), but at the same time claims that it will be a ‘borderless, digital educational society’ (Broggi et al, 2018: 1). It is not that Woolf has no physical campus, no buildings, that is the issue here. Woolf clearly wants to be seen as an institution, one that connects students and teachers across the world. But does this make Woolf a University, or are they simply a middle-man – a broker – connecting individuals and taking their cut, much like an insurance broker?

**University as Community: Looking Back to the Future**

The emergence of Woolf - and likely other blockchain providers of higher education in the future – raises important questions about what a university might, or should, consist in. If we look to the etymology of the word ‘university’, we find that it can be traced back to the 1300s and the idea of a body of people; it is a shortened form the Latin phrase *universitas magistrorum et scholarium* - a community of masters and scholars. There is something important here in the link between the idea of the university, and that of a community. I want to suggest that there is something more at stake here in the idea of community (and of a university) than just a group of people coming together with common interests.

To develop this idea, I turn to the work of the American philosopher, Stanley Cavell, and to his idea of criteria, and to how we assent to, or dissent from, criteria in community. For Cavell, it is as part of a community that we work out together how we see things in the world. I argue that these ideas are important for how we think of the community of masters and scholars in contemporary higher education. To be in (a higher education) community is to bear the responsibility of learning with and from others. It is not about reaching some kind of majority consensus as a group, but rather working out to what we can, and cannot give our consent. It is, as Cavell puts it, to find out what each individual can accept, and whether on any given occasion, they are able to say that their community speaks for them (and so that they can speak on behalf of their community).

For Cavell, reaching such judgements is inextricably linked to our being human, and to being together in the world. It is part of our responsibility in a community. As Cavell puts it in his seminal work *The Claim of Reason*, ‘The wish and the search for community are the wish and the search for reason’. But reaching such judgements is surely also central to what it means to be in the university, and so part of what makes us a *universitas* – a community of masters and scholars working out together to what we will give our consent, and from which ideas we must dissent.

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The Woolf system promotes greater access to academics for students, and a 1:1 personalised bespoke education. While this might be attractive in a number of ways, especially in the light of the concern with contact time and value for money in more traditional forms of Higher Education, it raises two significant questions: First, to what extent Woolf is a university – at least in the sense of a community of masters and scholars – as opposed to merely a broker for tutorial services? Second, if universities are places where students and academics realise their responsibility as members of a community working out to what they will give or refuse consent, then how do systems like Woolf achieve this?

In an age where the university has arguably never been under greater pressure (be it from the challenges of recruitment and retention, to the precarity of many academic contracts, and the impact of external regulation), the emergence of providers like Woolf give us cause to consider again the very idea of a university, and what is distinctive about the kind of education that it opens up. What I am suggesting here is that the university is the axiomatic place for the working out of ideas (of theories, models, practices, hypotheses). But more than this, it is the place where we do this together with others. This is not, though, simply about doing things together (through collaborative research, or group seminars), but about a commitment to judging together the criteria by which we live together in the world. And this is what Cavell refers to when he writes that ‘we are educations for each other’ (1990, p. 31).(Standish 2012, 84). That it is plural shows that she speaks on behalf of others, that others have consented with her, and that her community is both hers, and that she is answerable to it.

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**Thomas Schramme, Professor of Philosophy, University of Liverpool:**

**The university's aim to enable self-formation**

