Jon Nixon builds upon various traditions within philosophy to enumerate core purposes and goals for higher education. This task is given special importance in light of the rise of neo-liberalism, the effect of which Nixon suggests is to devalue not only higher education, but virtually all the social values alien to commercial markets. Although higher education often falls short of his ideal, Nixon succeeds in presenting core rationales that establish higher education as an essential public good.

Nixon asks us to embrace social, civic and cosmopolitan “imaginaries” as a means to build out three specific ethics involving mutual “recognition,” “hospitality” and “rooted

cosmopolitanism.” These ethics sustain a higher education that would encourage students to explore their own as well as society’s functioning so as to develop and deepen our capacity for civil society. Says Nixon, “A system of higher education that did not contribute to social well-being would be inconceivable – a contradiction in terms. Whatever is educational about higher education is centrally concerned with social well-being” (p. 25).

Ultimately he argues that, “the purpose of higher education is not only, or even primarily, to accrue knowledge and understanding, but to frame a debate within which fine judgments can be made as to what constitutes useful knowledge for particular groups and individuals” (p. 29).

For Nixon, higher education is a uniquely important glue that holds civil society together. It provides an essential space in which we build our self-knowledge through the recognition of our differences, which in turn allows us to be articulate about our interdependence. Higher education is thus the place we reserve to reason together to envision the ways we shall live together. This is a powerful vision of what higher education might be.

Less clear, however, is how education becomes this space and why it is that higher education, specifically, is charged with this mission. Nixon acknowledges that diverse and poorly coordinated higher educational institutions create barriers that must be overcome before higher education can fulfill its capstone role. Nixon argues higher education can be understood a the formal exit from the larger educational system, the place wherein students configure their own “life purposes.” Nixon intends that higher education be defined by this function, rather than as a particular set of years or institutions in which schooling occurs. He does not consider the possibility that this role might better or more legitimately be the function of a secondary education that in most wealthy nations is the last universal form of education. This discrepancy between the universality of secondary education and the much more selective, exclusive and differentiated higher education apparently undergirds Nixon’s preoccupation with a quest towards social inclusivity and equality.

The path by which higher education shall emerge to embrace the ethics that Nixon extols is only dimly defined.
Currently, Nixon recognizes the hallmarks of current higher education as a place in which the professional tasks involving the review “of papers for academic journals, assessing and examining the work of students, advising on academic appointments and promotion, reviewing proposed courses.” These, says Nixon, must not become formalized in proceduralism, but can be made instead to anchor our pursuit towards the public good. Before it can be made to do so, the criteria for academicians’ professional decisions must be made both explicit and public so as to encourage discussion. By acknowledging the core practices involved in academy’s construction and dissemination of knowledge, Nixon appears to suggest that professional judgment is a key ingredient in social transformation. It is the inculcation of the capacity for professional judgment that provides an egalitarian society with its agency and vision, and these, in turn, are vital to engage in and sustain civil society.

As appealing as it sounds, it is difficult to anticipate how the material interests of academic practitioners in their professional careers can be brought into alignment with the broader humanistic ethics. Academics know how to produce and disseminate knowledge, but they have not yet embraced among themselves an organizational system that rewards the kind of ethical imperatives that Nixon sets out for us, even if many academics embrace them individually. Instead, as Nixon recognizes, academics have allowed their institutions to drift in directions dictated by market rewards.

To realize the transformative potential of higher education for all, Nixon (p. 120) would have us rely on a process of “democratic struggle for freedom and equality.” Even more powerful is his suggestion that higher education may itself become a “redundant category” within a “republic of learning” where the yearning of all to flourish and configure their own life purposes is enabled.
About the Reviewer

Dan Jacoby
School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences
University of Washington, Bothell

Dan Jacoby is a professor in policy studies at the University of Washington, Bothell where he teaches and pursues research in education, labor and public policy within its School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences.