



The Ends of the Humanities

Perspectives from the Humanities and Social Sciences

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On the heresy of temptation

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The Ends of Humanities - Volume 1: The Ends of the Humanities
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Melusina Press 2021

Published in 2021 by **Melusina Press**

11, Porte des Sciences

L-4366 Esch-sur-Alzette

<https://www.melusinapress.lu>

Melusina Press is an initiative of the University of Luxembourg.

Concept: Niels-Oliver Walkowski, Johannes Pause

Copyediting: Carolyn Knaup, Niels-Oliver Walkowski

Cover: Valentin Henning, Erik Seitz

The digital version of this publication is freely available at <https://www.melusina-press.lu>.

ISBN (Online): 978-2-919815-24-1

DOI (Publication): 10.26298/melusina.nd44-j643

DOI (Volume): 10.26298/melusina.qmp0-vm61

DOI (Series): 10.26298/2716-7550

ISSN (Online): 2716-7550

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On the heresy of temptation

As humans, we have the choice (*αἵρεσις*; *haíresis*) of what we think—and, therefore, what we feel, how we perceive the world around us, and how to respond to it or behave. This choice is not infinite, but it is considerably larger than for any other species on this planet. Yet, we are prone to deny this choice, because set assumptions order the world and give a feeling of security in an ever changing environment with a plethora of phenomena. We wouldn't be able to survive without this tendency to manage our perception of the world according to our pre-set assumptions, thereby reducing information to a level that we can deal with.

Nevertheless, this useful tool can become restrictive, rigid and, therefore, maladaptive, as we don't challenge our preconceptions. Sir Peter Medawar, a Nobel Laureate in Immunology wrote in his admirable essay *Advice to a young scientist* that a true scientist should not get up in the morning without having challenged her/his “pet hypothesis” (1979). It is this capacity to question our own beliefs that should characterise a true academic. Yet, to quote Sir Medawar again: “The human mind treats a new idea the way the body treats a strange protein: it rejects it.” (1967)

This is at least one reason—from my perspective as a psychologist perhaps the most important—why we need the humanities. They tell us how to ask the right questions, they open the doors to new perspectives of this world, and they help us to question our own beliefs in the creation of knowledge—and what we should do with it.

Yet, knowledge can be ambiguous: empowering yet dangerous, exciting yet punishable, as perhaps most famously represented in the biblical fall from grace. As academics it is only appropriate that we should reflect on the many temptations of the essence of our professional identities: the production of knowledge. Universities can, therefore, be dangerous places (i. e. full of heresy), or can be perceived as such, as they produce knowledge.

The arts and humanities occupy a remarkable place in human life. Children are socialised through stories, songs, movies, and art. As they advance through their years of schooling, they are introduced more formally to literature, music, history, the visual and performing arts, philosophy, and other similar cultural pursuits. Adults continue to participate in the arts and humanities, appreciating them for their intrinsic value and the personal enrichment they bring, as well as for the social bonds they create among members of a community. In the words of a recent report by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the arts and humanities “go beyond the immediate and instrumental to help us understand the past and future [...] they are critical to our pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness” (2013: 13).

At the same time, the public is devaluing the arts and humanities, with educators, parents, and—perhaps most importantly—politicians placing increasing emphasis on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) in schools and universities, and with many of these same voices underscoring the importance of employability as the outcome of education. The arts and humanities, it is often argued, are more ornamental than practical.

This view is most often associated with so-called neo-liberal politics, that I would prefer to call “pseudo-liberal”. In its very essence this political approach assumes that investments from society should repay—in short: a return-on-investment. Applied to academia, this leads to an economisation of higher education, including universities. In the UK higher education system, we have an example on our European doorstep in the developments that were initiated by Margaret Thatcher and relentlessly followed through by her successors, perhaps most infamously Tony Blair.

The UK higher education system provides an empirical test case scenario that we should learn from: first, the number of universities was artificially inflated by converting former polytechnics into universities. They were then left to fight for (economic) survival, which resulted in the rapid diminution in the number of universities (“Social Darwinism”). Those left over now fight over an ever smaller proportion of public research funding. To make a living, universities have embarked on accepting ever larger number of students as they guarantee the only source of income left. In research, more and more money is now earmarked for the so-called science and technology disciplines, leading to an impoverished academic landscape of what once used to be a beacon of learning, culture and research. It is not by co-incidence that internationally renowned academics such as Richard Dawkins and Anthony Clifford Grayling felt it timely and necessary to establish the New College of the Humanities in the centre of London, where students can attend university for the negligible fee of 18,000 pound sterling per year.

Certainly, the latest university rankings continue to show a few select UK universities such as Oxford, Cambridge and Imperial College London at the very top worldwide. Still, I am not the first to argue that these famous universities can defend their excellence as a consequence of their long and glorious history, including their financial assets. The average UK university has turned into a company, which is often managed at a senior and faculty level by people that come from industry, and who may not even have an academic degree. The economic ‘autonomy’ of the UK universities, so often heralded by politicians as necessary progress and liberation of the paternalism of 19th and 20th century society, and its replacement by the rules of free market forces, is, of course, nothing but a figment of the imagination. “Free market” does not exist in the realm of higher education: research resources are tightly controlled by companies and political will, which act as direct control levers to determine what is being researched, when and by whom.

The view of universities being factories of knowledge that can be readily turned into a return-on-investment is short-sighted and belies the intellectual limitations of its proponents. The economisation of academia is not its hope, but its demise. Most tragically of all: what is being damaged now will impoverish not only the academic landscape but also society as a whole.

A country such as Luxembourg should be proud of its University, with its stellar rise in university rankings despite its very young age, its rich portfolio of excellence in research and teaching, and not least its hugely successful Faculty of Language and Literature, Humanities, Arts and Education. Decision makers in and outside of the University should resist the temptation of quick-fix solutions and the easy promise of money

and economic success stories. Be proud of a University as a place of learning and knowledge, which is creative and, therefore, shapes a civilised society.

The humanities, arts and social sciences do not need a justification: they are at the heart of any civilisation that deserves its name.

Let me end by quoting Sir Peter Medawar again:

The purpose of scientific enquiry is not to compile an inventory of factual information, nor to build up a totalitarian world picture of Natural Laws in which every event that is not compulsory is forbidden. We should think of it rather as a logically articulated structure of justifiable beliefs about nature. It begins as a story about a Possible World—a story which we invent and criticise and modify as we go along, so that it ends by being, as nearly as we can make it, a story about real life. (1982: 110 et seq.)

Acknowledgement: This article was first published in D'Lëtzebuenger Land(no. 42, October 20, 2017).

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