Relevance of the Humanities?

> Education has two purposes: on the one hand to form the mind, on the other hand to train the citizen. The Athenians concentrated on the former, the Spartans on the latter. The Spartans won, but the Athenians were remembered.
>
> Bertrand Russell (1931)

Corrupting the youth.

The Australian Government's recent proposal to double university fees for the humanities is presented as a response to the current crisis by making higher education more "relevant" and students more employable, but the rationale for the assault on the humanities is not new. When the perennial issue was raised fifty years ago, the educational philosopher Israel Scheffler (1969, 764) asked "who, in his right mind, would wish learning to be irrelevant?" and "if relevance is not relevant, what is?" Of course, this was a way of posing his fundamental questions: "Relevant to what, how, and why?"

Writing in *The Australian* Adam Creighton (2020) welcomes the government's proposal, asking contemptuously: "Want to spent three years reading Foucault and dreaming about vandalizing Captain Cook statues? Fine, but don't expect a cent from taxpayers." The reference to destroying statues is code for a fear of students' iconoclasm that might seek social change by reverting to the activism of the 1960s. Of course, the student movement was part of developments that gave rise to such radical ideas as the peace movement, environmentalism, feminism, anti-discrimination and civil rights. Leaving aside the absurd suggestion that the humanities incite vandalism, there is an acute irony in this taunt at philosophers today. In one of Plato's dialogues, the sophist Callicles mocks Socrates in exactly the same way, saying that "if one studies philosophy they will have no knowledge of the practical things that concern men of affairs and the business life of the city" and are, therefore, "ridiculous like those who play childish games." Of course, Socrates was condemned to death for challenging the official orthodoxies or "gods of the state" and thereby "corrupting the youth." At his trial, in effect answering Creighton's jibe, Socrates suggests that the state of Athens should indeed support him because his role as gadfly and critic is essential for a decent society.

McKinsey or von Humboldt?

The most common response to the government's heavy-handed social engineering has been to suggest ways in which the arts and social sciences are, after all, useful in employment. For example, academic philosophers have protested the devaluing of their discipline which is, or at least may be

caricatured as, the least practical or relevant of all. In 'An Open Letter on the Importance of Protecting Philosophy'[1] the signatories complain that the government "ignores evidence that philosophy prepares students for an unpredictable and changing job market." It "ignores evidence that employers already prize the very qualities" developed by philosophy such as analytical skills and the ability to solve complex problems. The philosophers explain "there is a strong case to be made that philosophy provides equal or better training than any other major" for employment in the job market.

Like the kiss of Judas, this response betrays the humanities by tacitly accepting the assumption that it is their marketability, making students "job-ready," which justifies the very existence of the humanities in particular, and universities in general. A different view has been noted by Tim Soutphommasane (2020): Besides the practical values of a university education, "there must remain a place for pursuing knowledge for its own sake." He says "We must see education not as an extended exercise in economics, but essentially as an exercise in civilising the mind." This venerable conception of a liberal education may be traced back to Wilhelm von Humboldt's conception of higher education that emerged with the founding of the University of Berlin in 1810 and which became a model for the rest of Europe and the world. von Humboldt's educational vision was based on key ideas of the Enlightenment going beyond vocational training and skills to include a cultivation of the mind and character. Today, the philosopher and former German Minister of Culture Julian Nida-Rümelin (2009) has aptly remarked on the discrepancies between traditional ideas and modern conceptions of education as preparation for the labour market saying that we need to decide between McKinsey and von Humboldt.

In the English speaking world the same ideals were articulated by Cardinal John Henry Newman in his classic *The Idea of a University* in 1852. On Newman's broad conception, education would not merely provide professional training but would permit students to develop moral character, creativity and intellectual virtues such as a dedication to the ideal of truth and an indifference to merely fashionable thought. Newman (1852/1996, 78) says "Knowledge is capable of being its own end." The human mind is so constituted that "any kind of knowledge, if it be really such, is its own reward" which is desirable "though nothing come of it, as being itself a treasure, and a sufficient remuneration of years of labour." (1852/1996, 85).

Remarkably, there has been no hint of such views from academics themselves. Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at UNSW, Professor Claire Annesley (2020), explains that "The immense value of Arts and Social Science education is well established" by which she means that the skills learned "are in strong demand from employers." She explains, "Now, more than ever, businesses, organisations and industries across Australia need Arts and Social

[1] ABC *Religion & Ethics*, August 3, 2020. https://www.abc.net.au/religion/open-letter-on-the-importance-of-protecting-philosophy/12517642

Science graduates to help shape global success." Ironically, Annesley extols the virtues of "critical minds" that learn "to challenge perceived wisdoms" and "question orthodoxies" but fails to challenge the neo-liberal orthodoxy and instrumental conception of education in the humanities.

Similarly, following recent plans to close the philosophy program at the University of West England, Professor James Ladyman (2020) protests that "philosophy and other arts graduates are no less employable than those from the sciences," and "the arts and humanities can be directly relevant to employment." Ladyman notes the applicability of literature to the creative industries and the relevance of history to work in museums just as philosophy, too, can be relevant to the ethical problems arising for artificial intelligence and robotics. However, at best, such specialized vocational opportunities would be available for a very few graduates in these fields and Ladyman makes no attempt to suggest how the rest of the philosophy curriculum might be applied directly in employment. By contrast with Ladyman's carefully chosen examples, what employment opportunities could be cited for students of Plato, Descartes, Hegel, Wittgenstein, Frege? Among the most popular courses I have taught for many years has been *God, Life, the Universe and Everything*, borrowing and adapting the catchy title of Douglas Adams' book. What conceivable relevance to becoming job-ready are the subtleties of St. Anselm's Ontological Proof for the existence of God, or the Big Bang and Cosmological Argument for a first cause?

There is a certain *mauvaise foi* in the appeals to instrumental values and practical relevance. The reality is that most of the *specific* content of the humanities curriculum and its value are impossible to justify on instrumental grounds. In their hearts, academics know perfectly well that the importance and appeal of the great ideas of their discipline do not lie in their usefulness in any utilitarian sense. Moreover, the architects of philistine government policies, and apologists like Creighton, are unlikely to be persuaded because they know that other disciplines such as law, the sciences and even an MBA also teach critical thinking, communication skills, cogent argumentation and problem solving.

At the Open Day information desk, with their parents hovering, students invariably ask what can they do with a philosophy qualification. They are evidently pleased by my usual reply: "Don't ask that question." I explain it's not that philosophy graduates are not employable. On the contrary, as we have noted, the evidence is overwhelming that they are sought after by employers. However, students instinctively understand something that their parents and university managers have failed to appreciate. Pandering to the claims of "relevance" is a failure to respond to the students' innate intellectual curiosity and a betrayal of the traditional ideals on which universities were founded and which remain their *raison d'être*.

Learning outcomes.

A few decades ago, in an early sign of these trends, universities embraced the corporate fashion for fatuous "mission statements." Management consultants have been paid vast sums for "re-branding" their product with demeaning

slogans like “Never stand still” which would have sounded better in Latin. One academic wit pinned a cartoon of a hamster in a treadmill on his office door. In the same spirit, the course guide for every subject is required to list formulaic “graduate attributes and tangible “learning outcomes” like soap advertisements for “smoother skin” or breakfast cereal “to keep you regular.” The value of a course on Plato is reduced to five keywords. The wonder is not that university managers think that such empty bureaucratic quality control is important but rather that academics conform obediently to such inane practices. As Denby (2005, 7) notes, course guides give little indication that a subject such as literature “might offer extraordinary degrees of pleasure, that it might offer knowledge of an idiosyncratic, transcendent, and irreplaceable sort.” The catalogue fails to convey the aesthetic case for literature. The “thrill of sublimity, of heart-stopping beauty, or excited access to a spiritually overwhelming realm, has been ruled out of existence.”

In the same vein, the aesthetic case for mathematics will be more surprising. G.H. Hardy’s (1969) famous book *A Mathematician’s Apology* is described by the Cambridge scientist and novelist C.P. Snow as “the best account of what it was like to be a *creative artist*.” Hardy remarks pointedly that the practical value of mathematics in its many applications “obtrude themselves on the dullest imagination.” However, any genuine mathematician knows “that it is not on these crude achievements that the real case for mathematics rests.” In a famous toast, Hardy proposed “Here’s to pure mathematics, may it never find an application.” In fact, an apparently absurd and unimaginable non-Euclidean geometry devised by Riemann in 1854 turned out to be the best description of the universe in Einstein’s physics. Similarly, Alan Turing’s 1937 paper on an esoteric problem in the foundations of mathematics, the *Entscheidungsproblem*, had no conceivable purpose and would not have been funded today on the usual criteria of usefulness or contribution to national priorities. However, Turing’s paper conceived the foundations of the digital computer. The moral is that even the most useful discoveries must be driven by pure intellectual interest and curiosity of free individuals searching for truth.

It is striking that academics themselves have internalized the neo-liberal market ideology. Thus, another open letter has been addressed to the Education Minister Dan Tehan, signed by 73 senior university professors in various disciplines who share the commercial framing of the problem we have seen.[2] Again, the professors quote business leaders and repeat the usual refrain about the value of humanities for “creating a flexible, responsive workforce in an increasingly diverse economy.” By contrast, appearing to take a more principled stance, the philosophers’ letter makes a token gesture to the contribution of their discipline to our liberal democracy. However, Scheffler (1969, 773) warns that the idea of education as an instrument for the realization of social goals “harbors the

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[2] Open Letter to Minister Tehan, *The Conversation,* https://theconversation.com/an-open-letter-to-australias-education-minister-dan-tehan-signed-by-73-senior-professors-142989

greatest conceivable danger to the ideal of a free and rational society" *no matter how worthy the social goals are thought to be*. The goals must themselves be subject to criticism rather than accepted uncritically as tenets of faith. This is, after all, the lesson to be learned from the Presocratic founders of Western philosophy in Ancient Greece. Scheffler says "If the fruit of knowledge is its use in life, it must be a life itself infused with a respect for knowledge and criticism."

Job-ready graduates or European supremacism?

In the US Ginsberg (2011, 125) points to the "development of an ever-expanding nonacademic curriculum" of life skills subjects for credit. In Australia, one arts faculty, pre-empting government policies, has developed compulsory "Capstone" courses designed to make students "job-ready graduates," even anticipating government terminology to marketize their product. In one egregious case, a course devoid of intellectual content included a class on shaking hands at job interviews. Such Mickey Mouse courses have become part of the academic curriculum for which students pay exorbitant fees and which displace the already limited opportunity for serious scholarly engagement with ideas.

Although the same tendencies are evident in the United States (Ginsberg 2011), the traditional value of a humanities education has been widely understood where professional qualifications in law, medicine or engineering are post-graduate study following an undergraduate degree in the liberal arts. Indeed, prestigious institutions such as Columbia University in New York have compulsory undergraduate courses concerned with 'Contemporary Civilization,' essentially a survey of the Great Books of the Western Canon (Denby 1996/2005). Rather than learning to shake hands, students are required to read texts including Homer, Plato, Old and New Testament, Machiavelli, Dante, Hume and Kant, Shakespeare, Marx and Mill, and Beauvoir, among many others.

Of course, as Searle (1990) notes, a curriculum limited mainly to 'dead white European males' is seen as fundamentally problematic. The history of "Western Civilization" is seen as a history of imperialism and colonialism, oppressing women, slaves and ethnic minorities. However, even Edward Saïd whose *Orientalism* has been the foundational text of 'Post-colonial studies' is described in Denby's (2005, 347) *Great Books* as an opponent of "canon-bashing." The critical tradition from Socrates through the writings of Mill and Marx has served to liberate students from the conventional pieties of modern politics precisely by inculcating a critical attitude. Far from being some kind of unitary phenomenon of "hegemonic discourse" the writers of the canon "revised one another, quarrelled with one another, reversed one another's assumptions."

In Australia, the issue has been intensely debated with the initiatives to establish elite, privately funded programs in Ramsay Centres at universities (Riemer 2018,

2019a,b). In an open letter,[3] academics at the University of Sydney characterise the programs as "European supremacism writ large." However, their critique derives from traditional Enlightenment ideals of a liberal education. They write:

> We are a university, not a training institute … Enquiry in the humanities must be free and conducted independent of the influence of third parties. It is in the nature of a true liberal arts education that it is undertaken for its own sake, independently of any intended instrumentalisation, whether political or social.

Paradoxically perhaps, enthusiasm for Ramsay Centres and the government's assault on the humanities arise from the same impulse. As Soutphommasane recognizes, the underlying motives are essentially ideological arising from suspicion of academic radicals who promote progressive ideas. Soutphommasane notes that Scott Morrison has spoken of his preference for compliant, quiet Australians who are "the very opposite of the kind of people who are formed through a liberal education." As Soutphommasane says, "By discouraging students from the arts, the government makes it clear it doesn't see the virtues of certain kinds of citizenship." Indeed, this is a dissident *Socratic Citizenship* in the title of Villa's (2001) book. To be sure, this characterization of a humanities education is an idealization and, to some degree, even a self-serving myth. However, behind the government's policies is the recognition that "In its relation to society, a free university should be expected to be, in a sense, 'subversive'" (Chomsky 1973, 90). Chomsky acknowledges that the demand to be "relevant" is justifiable in a very general sense. However, he points out that in practice, as we have seen, this means that universities provide a service to maintaining institutions with power and privilege. Moreover, "It is not difficult for members of the university community to delude themselves into believing that they are maintaining a 'neutral, value free' position when they are simply responding to demands set elsewhere." The need for a "subversive" education as "intellectual self-defence" is important because:

> "[Universities] are institutions for indoctrination and for imposing obedience. Far from creating independent thinkers, … [universities] have always, throughout history, played an institutional role in a system of control and coercion. And once you are well educated, you have already been socialized in ways that support the power structure, which, in turn, rewards you immensely." (Chomsky 2000, 16)

Invoking von Humboldt, Chomsky (1973) wrote:

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[3] Open letter from University of Sydney academics https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScz2bd3bi2u2kQdfQnO6n4IKIzekt188nGztQ0u53_XPU9Mhg/viewform

> A free society should encourage the development of a university that escapes the not-too-subtle compulsion to be 'relevant' in this sense. The university will be able to make its contribution to a free society only to the extent that it overcomes the temptation to conform unthinkingly to the prevailing ideology and to the existing patterns of power and privilege.

Democratic decision making.

In Australia, the subordination to Callicles' "men of affairs and the business life of the city" has only become more evident since the publication of Coady's (2000) book *Why Universities Matter* two decades ago. Coady already noted the erosion of traditional university values and practices in an oppressive managerialism. Academic life is overwhelmed with bureaucratic demands in a culture of surveillance and compliance, quantitative metrics, performance indicators and the complete disappearance of democratic, collegial decision making. Not long ago, university departments and faculties were run through committee meetings where jobs to be advertised, selection committees, curriculum matters and other policies were decided by vote. Today, decision-making committees have been abolished and meetings are only for reporting management decrees. The phenomenon is world-wide (Ginsberg 2011, 3). Lorenz (2012, 615) notes that this relatively recent introduction of undemocratic managerial control over faculty is unprecedented in the history of universities in democracies worthy of the name and is "nothing other than the introduction of a culture of permanent mistrust."

These policies have expunged academics' professional autonomy and have necessitated a bureaucratic machinery to manage universities. Its typical consequence has been the rise of academic regulators and compliance bureaucrats (Lorenz 2012, 604). As Ginsberg (2011) shows, "deanlets" and "deanlings" are setting the educational agenda. He examines the rampant "managerial pathologies" that have come to dominate universities with expanding bureaucracies at the same time as reductions of full-time academics. The prevailing culture of management by edict, audit and 'quality control' has reversed the previous tacit assumption that academics are competent and trustworthy and that they are motivated by their commitment to their calling as dedicated teachers and researchers. Unlike most other workplaces, universities derived mutual benefit from an arrangement in which academics are paid for something that they aspire to do excellently for its intrinsic motivations and rewards. Predictably, academics find the endless audit and compliance exercises, among other bureaucratic tasks, to be ludicrous, leading to "cynicism towards the system that forces us to carry out the ridiculous chores" (Lorenz 2012).

Lorenz (2012, 619) points out that the paradoxical and disastrous consequence of managerial notions of accountability is that someone can be an excellent teacher and researcher and at the same time be assessed as poor by the 'quality assurance' system. My own inspiring teachers such as legendary Columbia

philosopher Sidney Morgenbesser (Denby 2005, 250) would fail every modern metric of teaching excellence such as "constructive alignment" and other meaningless, pseudo-scientific pedagogical precepts beloved by academic bureaucrats. Raymond Gaita (2000, 44) remarked on the "dismal tendency to authoritarianism among university administrators" as they have "betrayed an ideal which it was [their] responsibility to serve." As Gaita noted, "never before has there been so much talk of 'excellence and quality assurance' and never before has there been so little concern for either" (2000, 41).

Academic Freedom.

Perhaps the most significant illustration of the destructiveness of corporate values at universities in Australia is the fact that tenure was abolished by our own academic staff association in exchange for a small salary increment. This was a self-inflicted, fatal blow by academics themselves to the most fundamental principle of university life. Pious talk today of "academic freedom" is now empty since the sole protection has been destroyed. The safeguard of "permanence" is meaningless since sackings and redundancies are now commonplace on the grounds of financial pressure, restructuring, redundancy or other pretexts such as "performance management." As US literary scholar Jacques Barzun (1993, 60) noted long ago, "a wrongful dismissal can always be passed off as having nothing to do with academic freedom." Indeed, in Australia there have been cases of harassment and sacking on openly political grounds concerning the expression of views regarded as disrespectful and offensive.[4]

Precisely for this reason, tenure has been sacrosanct in the US on the model of judicial appointments, designed to protect independent and unpopular judgments (Hofstadter and Metzger 1955). Indeed, tenure has been regarded as a hallmark of higher education and historically seen as an "inviolable principle" of the academy, essential to the quality of a first-rate university (Mallon 2001). The work of Hofstadter and Metzger (1955) has been described as "the closest thing to an official scholarly response to the danger of McCarthyism from the university world" (McLemee 2005).

In light of these views, it is revealing to consider the recent French Report on academic freedom[5] published by the Australian government in 2019. For the

[4] Verity, J. and Syed, J. 2019. Dr Tim Anderson sacked by the University of Sydney. Honi Soit, February 12.

http://honisoit.com/2019/02/dr-tim-anderson-sacked-by-the-university-of-sydney/

Marin-Guzman, D. and Bolton, R. 1919. Lecturer Tim Anderson sues Sydney University over sacking. *Financial Review*. April 18.

https://www.afr.com/work-and-careers/workplace/lecturer-tim-anderson-sues-sydney-university-over-sacking-20190417-p51ey5

[5] *Report of the Independent Review of Freedom of Speech in Australian Higher Education Providers.* https://docs.education.gov.au/node/52661

reasons just noted, the most remarkable feature of the Report is the almost complete absence of any mention of tenure. In 300 pages, the issue is only mentioned in passing in the section on academic freedom in the USA among several other countries. The Report gives a comprehensive survey of the history of debate about academic freedom in Australia and records widespread complacency among Universities about the adequacy of current protections of academic freedom and the conviction that there is no need for further government regulation.

In fact, the Report (22) records earlier concerns by a 2001 Parliamentary committee which concluded that academic freedom was under threat since "universities cannot be relied on to maintain their own internal inquiries when serious issues arise which go to the core of academic freedom." Specific grounds for such concerns were said to emerge from "the rise of managerialism in universities in Australia and consequential effects upon collegiality, freedom of expression and academic freedom." Remarkably, the committee referred specifically to the fact that "the new managerial culture is now so entrenched that universities have an instinct to stifle uncomfortable opinions of a kind usually associated with academic institutions." Recent events at UNSW[6] which involved officials deleting a politically controversial Tweet have demonstrated the tendency warned against by the Parliamentary committee:

> They have an understandable tendency to place the value of the university's reputation before their obligation to protect the rights of its faculty members to free expression. This tendency arises from a disregard for what universities should stand for. Some university administrators may have never understood this. Others may have forgotten.

The earlier Parliamentary committee reached no view as to whether statutory protection of academic freedom was necessary. The French Report (295) recommends a "Model Code" whose objects include the goal: "To ensure that freedom of speech and intellectual inquiry as aspects of academic freedom are treated as paramount values by the university." The Report also recommends that the relevant Parliamentary Act replace the terms "free intellectual inquiry in learning, teaching and research" with the terms "freedom of speech and academic freedom." However, this is purely cosmetic to disguise the absence of real protection behind the "paramount values." The test of institutional and legal protection of academic freedom is whether academics may be dismissed for anything less than "gross misconduct," in other words, as Barzun remarked, in

[6] https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/aug/03/unsw-faces-backlash-after-deleting-twitter-post-critical-of-chinas-crackdown-in-hong-kong

https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-08-03/unsw-under-fire-for-deleting-china-social-media-posts/12517306

ways that can be passed off as having nothing to do with academic freedom. In Australia there have been sackings that were not even disguised but directly based on the controversial views of the academic in question. These realities are not mentioned in the French Report itself although they are listed among other more or less serious infringements in one of the submissions to the Committee provided as an Appendix. Those cases are sufficient to demonstrate that the only real protection of academic freedom has been lost and the pious rhetoric about "paramount values" is empty.

Relevance

The loss of tenure, bloated university administration, burgeoning of casual staff with no rights, and students trapped by increasing debt all conspire to ensure passivity and subordination to the demands of the economy. Cost-cutting according to market principles leads to the exploitation of vulnerable, precarious casual lecturers, usually graduate students, replacing full-time academics. In light of the recent government announcement, it is sobering to read Coady's remarks two decades earlier about the way that political leaders of both major parties sought to dismantle our traditions "in the name of managerial and economic efficiency" (2000, 13). Prophetically, Coady noted their "pretence that universities are merely business corporations" and, therefore, that "universities should aim to become predominantly (and perhaps eventually, totally) self-funding." The planned sharp rise in tuition today reflects a familiar attitude characterised by Ronald G. Ehrenberg, director of Cornell Higher Education Research Institute and a trustee of the State University of New York: "There has been a shift from the belief that we as a nation benefit from higher education, to a belief that it's the people receiving the education who primarily benefit and so they should foot the bill" (Rampell, 2012).

Thus, Henry Giroux (2002, 439) writing in the *Harvard Educational Review* on 'Neoliberalism, Corporate Culture and the Promise of Higher Education' observed, "The overt corporatization of university leadership … the creeping vocationalization and subordination of learning to the dictates of the market – has become an open and defining principle of education at all levels of learning." Giroux noted the prescient remarks of a US business executive in 1998 attacking traditional academic practices and suggesting that universities should model themselves after successful private corporations by downsizing, increasing academic workloads as well as abolishing tenure, democratic governance and forms of knowledge without instrumental relevance. Indeed, in Australia, these "reforms" have all been instituted or tolerated by academics themselves.

The trends which are destructive of traditional ideals must be understood, not as aberrations, but rather as tendencies that have always been inherent in educational institutions. As Bertrand Russell remarked, "A certain percentage of children have the habit of thinking; one of the aims of education is to cure them of this habit." Recognizing this, we need to ensure that the primary task of

university education is not to make students job-ready, but to create critical, informed, and humane citizens, and a society in which the ideals of free inquiry are themselves the main measure of relevance.

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