Theology and the wider liberal arts agenda

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Only be sure that you act on the message and do not merely listen; for that would be to mislead yourselves. A man who listens to the message but never acts upon it is like one who looks in a mirror at the face nature gave him. He glances at himself and goes away, and at once forgets what he looked like. But the man who looks closely into the perfect law, the law that makes us free, and who lives in its company, does not forget what he hears, but acts upon it; and that is the man who by acting will find happiness.¹

There are a number of answers to the question, 'What is the place of theology in the liberal arts agenda?' If we take the word 'liberal' to refer to an education that is something more than a technical induction into a narrow professional culture then there is an obvious role for theology in the undergraduate degree, especially as the liberal arts increasingly

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reappraise the place of language in discipline-based knowledge. As a psychologist, for example, I note that an increasing number of my colleagues are recognising that language or discourse is the chief and constitutive medium of inquiry into questions about what it is to be human ... in the beginning is the word. And any discursive psychological inquiry that takes a serious open-minded interest in the full gamut of human experience must recognise that amongst the key words are a set of venerable terms which are at the heart of theological scholarship: faith, doubt, belief, forgiveness, confession, attachment, love, the distinction between flesh and body, double-mindedness, authenticity, evil, holiness, conversion and the unseen. While I believe that psychologists, even the more radical, have too much feared to go where theologians tread, it is certainly true that some of the most influential thinkers in the humanities have shown great respect for theology: see for example Julia Kristeva's work on the Christian mystical tradition, Derrida's late writings on negative theology, Foucault's reappraisal of confession in The History of Sexuality and Ricoeur's writings on evil. The necessity of such respect was powerfully brought home to me when recently viewing Marie-Louise von Franz's brilliant exposition of Jungian dream-analysis, 'The Way of the Dream.' Here we see how deeply Christian iconography has soaked into the European psyche, whether the dreamer declares themselves a believer, an atheist, new age or agnostic. Our dreams show us that it is vain for anyone with European roots to pretend they can, simply by saying so, deny they are Christian in this broad cultural sense.

The unwillingness of psychologists to entertain theological concepts could be put down to their aspiration to be scientists. And here I must note that none of the talks in the program for this seminar on 'God in the University' is focussed on science. Why? The sciences form a crucial part of the university – are they necessarily godless? Maybe Tom Frame feared that, if science got its foot in the door, particularly biology or evolutionary psychology, theology would get short shrift. Witness this quote from the American sociologist EO Wilson in his latest book:

The scientist's devotion to parsimony in explanation excludes the divine spirit and other extraneous agents. Most importantly, we have come to the crucial stage in the history of biology when religion itself is subject to the
explanations of the natural sciences ... the final decisive edge enjoyed by scientific naturalism will come from its capacity to explain traditional religion, its chief competitor, as a wholly natural phenomenon. Theology is not likely to survive as an independent intellectual discipline ...²

I am not so pessimistic. For I believe that theology will not find its proper place in the liberal arts agenda until we have reassessed the way that science has apparently excluded it from that agenda. So what I want to say embraces the sciences in particular, not just the arts. In this I am being consistent with history. For, from Plato through the Middle Ages and onwards, the term 'liberal arts' has referred to both arts and sciences, comprising the trivium: grammar, logic and rhetoric, and the quadrivium: arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy.

The dismissal of religion and theology from the academy by thinkers like E.O. Wilson, Steven Pinker and Richard Dawkins supposedly derives from their reading of Darwin. In the name of Darwin they declare that charity, altruism and the moral sense are all masks for selfishness. Because our genes are selfish, our behaviour is selfish. 'Gene selfishness will usually give rise to selfishness in individual behaviour,' writes Dawkins, conveniently short-circuiting any discussion of the psyche or the soul.³ What evolves evolves for our genes' good and certainly not for the good of anyone else. Yet none of these authors seems to be aware that they contradict Darwin himself when they reason like this. This is because they assume Darwin only wrote one book of consequence for the interpretation of human mind and behaviour, On the Origin of Species, a book that deliberately did not discuss 'man' at all. None of these authors appears to have read the book in which Darwin did discuss the evolution of the human mind, and at length: The Descent of Man. There Darwin argues that the distinctive feature of hominid as opposed to animal evolution is that the unit of natural selection for our species was the group, 'community' or 'tribe,' not the individual (a thesis that is rapidly gaining ground in evolutionary biology under the banner of 'the social brain hypothesis').⁴

According to Darwin, all the 'highest' and most distinctive human faculties – altruism, language, sympathy and conscience ('the moral sense') were consequences of the need for human tribes to be psychologically cohesive, as more cohesive tribes would vanquish less cohesive tribes.
‘Selfish and contentious people will not cohere, and without coherence nothing can be effected,’ he observed. In fact, the main thrust of Darwin’s group-based psychology was to explain why humans must undergo what he called ‘moral struggle,’ the unremitting conflict between the individual’s ‘short-term’ self-centred instincts and their longer-term altruistic or ‘social instincts.’ While Freud was quite happy to follow Darwin in accepting that ‘the psychology of the group is the oldest human psychology,’ more recent scientistic psychologists have ignored what Darwin wrote, reinventing him in their own ultra-individualistic image. Hence the likes of Dawkins and Pinker can blithely assert, directly contradicting Darwin (albeit in Darwin’s name): ‘when people say that animals act for the good of the group, they seem not to realize that the assumption is in fact a radical departure from Darwinism and almost certainly wrong.’ In this way they avoid any need for the biologist or social scientist to discuss moral struggle or engage with theological concepts.

The university of excellence

It would be too cute to blame the demise of the liberal arts agenda for the failure of authors like Dawkins ever to cite, let alone to read, the most relevant book by the Great Author upon whom they say they found their views. Nevertheless, unless some version of this agenda is resuscitated, it is unlikely that the future academy will find much scope for theology. For it to be resuscitated there needs to be a new rapprochement with the idea that universities do more for their students than prepare them for a specific career. Evidence suggests that such a rapprochement is currently under way.

The idea of a university has a long history with a number of phases. These phases can be distinguished in terms of the different kinds of compromise the university sector has struck between the ‘training function’ of tertiary education institutions and their ‘ethical function’ that may be framed, for example, as creating ‘a liberal culture for the welfare of mankind.’ The first function can be phrased in economic terms (providing employable graduates to the job market) congenial to the vision of the university as a business or trading corporation. Highlighting this function may lead to what Readings calls ‘the University of Excellence’ in which accountability (a term which formerly referred to the academy’s responsibilities to society; as in Cardinal Newman’s The Idea of a University, 1873)
becomes synonymous with accounting, as in 'performance indicators,' which supposedly allow us to judge 'quality, excellence, effectiveness and pertinence' without reference to valorised content.⁹

Charles Sturt University's 'Degree Initiative' has instituted a university-wide process of collaborative curriculum renewal which, like its many homologues across the sector nationally and internationally, promises a shift in the balance between the university's two functions: it represents a relative strengthening of commitment to the function of social responsibility, a commitment that is best understood, we argue, in terms of ethical values underpinning a particular conception of citizenship. This will have the effect of clearly differentiating actuarial notions of accounting or auditing 'excellence' from substantive ethical notions of accountability or social responsibility. Hence the idea that students should be prepared for citizenship implies a significant shift in how the university itself is conceived, as we will see below. Ours is not a move 'back' to what Newman saw as the role of the university: inducting the student into the set-apart intellectual culture, presided over by theology, that is internal to academic community, so that he becomes 'a gentleman.' Neither is it focussed predominantly on the humanities, as the place where the university's socio-political mission must be accomplished. Learning for citizenship as we understand it is an imperative that opens the curriculum up to the local and global challenges external to the university, an imperative impelled just as much by a new reflexivity in the sciences as by a traditional liberal arts agenda.

Until recently, it was assumed by many academics that their social responsibilities could be partitioned off from their professional responsibilities along the lines of the private-public divide. Hence, for 'scientist-practitioners' like psychologists there would be 'nothing in the definition of psychology that dedicates [their] science to the solution of social problems.'¹⁰ Anyone who recognized broader responsibilities, only did so on the understanding that their obligations 'as citizens' were 'considerably broader than their responsibilities as scientists.' Over the past two or three decades, the divorce between the academy and social accountabilities was further buttressed by another broader movement within tertiary education. This was the move towards 'new managerialism' or 'total quality management' in academic institutions that undertook to reframe themselves as corporate entities, a move which Readings glosses as the rise of 'The University of Excellence.' The effect of this move has been to evacuate all social content
from the term ‘accountability’ as applied to education and replace it with actuarial methods of measurement. For example, in Australian universities, research ‘excellence’ has for many years had nothing to do with the content of the research the university does (whether it has ethical or cultural content, or solves social problems or theoretical problems for example). It has to do with ‘content-empty’ quantitative measures: (a) the number of dollars in research grants it has gained annually; and (b) the number of ‘DEEWR-points’ it has garnered – that is, the number of articles that had been published in peer-reviewed journals. The same actuarial approach has been taken to all ‘key performance indicators,’ such as teaching ‘quality,’ something assessed through a lecturer’s ‘scores’ on ‘subject evaluation questionnaires’ filled in by students. Thus, every university can then be apportioned a cumulative score or scores in a ‘star’ (1 low, 5 high) system for overall teaching and research ‘quality’ in volumes such as The Good Universities’ Guide. Anything that is scored ‘high’ on these generic scales is counted as ‘excellent.’ The need for excellence is something we can all agree on: no further debate is called for. Nothing need be ‘hedged or mitigated,’ nothing requires further explanation, precisely because excellence ‘has no external referent or internal content’.11 Appeals to excellence have been endemic in the sector, a world-wide phenomenon.

The Idea of Curriculum

The beginnings of a move against ‘The University of Excellence’ can be tracked by charting the recent vicissitudes of graduates ‘generic skills’ (or ‘graduate attributes’) in Australia. These terms refer to such student capacities as those for: ethical practice, team-work, effective communication; analytical skills and critical and reflective judgement; problem solving and work planning. The advantages claimed for generic skills emerged from discussions in the early 1990s between educationalists and industry over the need to enhance the ‘employability’ of university graduates. Businesses said they wanted employees who were ‘flexible,’ ‘adaptive’ and capable of ‘learning on the job’ because they wanted to develop such contextual attributes as ‘business savvy’ and ‘customer focus.’12 So universities have striven to build these or cognate attributes into their degrees. The Federal Government bought into this issue by including graduate attributes in its Course Evaluation Questionnaire (CEQ). As a result every university now espouses certain ‘graduate attributes’ (GAs) which it undertakes to have
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built into all its courses. To this end, Charles Sturt University (CSU) has an obligatory section in all its ‘course profiles’ where course coordinators are required to show how the course they coordinate implements CSU's designated GAs. Yet when this section of course profiles was surveyed recently, a sizeable minority of coordinators had entered ‘not applicable to this course’ in the GA ‘box.’ Does this mean that they believe their courses do not teach students to solve problems, communicate effectively, plan work, be ethical or think analytically? Far from it. It shows rather that the collaborative thinking about holistic course design required to implement substantive curriculum initiatives across an entire university run entirely counter to the highly individualised content-empty work processes institutionalised by ‘total quality management’ in Readings’ University of Excellence. Indeed, the very word ‘curriculum’ proves alien to many Australian academics.13

Each time I have switched universities in my academic career I have generously been offered a variety of subjects to teach. As my expertise is in the psychology of infancy, I typically get offered ‘Developmental Psychology,’ an offer I accept. I am then expected to go away into my office, close my door and ‘update’ the existing version of the subject, remaking it in my own image. This is where I get to express my ‘academic freedom.’ I add in a lot about infancy and erase whatever strikes me as less relevant in the previous offering, perhaps some gerontology goes, or some of the 1000 references to Jean Piaget. When my turn comes to move on, my successor will do likewise. The only people who actually know what I teach are my students. Provided I am doing a ‘professional job,’ and my students evaluate what I do as organised, interesting, well-informed and properly assessed, Developmental Psychology will be recorded as ‘excellent,’ no colleagues will query what I do, and I can end my year with a sense of achievement.

This is the highly individualised ‘inside story’ typical of the University of Excellence. It fits well with Miller's notion that ‘there is nothing in the definition of psychology that dedicates our science to the solution of social problems.’14 However the radical divorce between fact and value which sustains Miller's vision of social science now seems untenable on three grounds. First of all the kind of ‘academic freedom’ that allows me to teach about and research whatever my intellect tells me is an ‘interesting problem’ has fallen foul of the ever-strengthening discourse of ethics. For example, most of the famous experiments with which psychologists
love to regale new students cannot be replicated today for ethical reasons. Zimbardo’s famous ‘prison experiment’ in which undergraduates were randomly and unwittingly assigned to be ‘guards’ or ‘prisoners’ for two weeks in a lifelike jail had to be discontinued after a week as the brutality of the guards soared and prisoners began to dement. Harlow’s cruel experiments on the effects of rearing baby monkeys in isolation-cages led the monkeys to become sociopathic. Many experiments, like Asch’s study of conformity, depend on deceiving the stooges who take part in them. Milgram’s ‘obedience’ study, for example, led innocent bystanders to be sucked into a process where they were being ordered to give increasingly damaging/fatal electric shocks to an elderly man with a bad heart (most obeyed the orders). None of these studies would today get past first post in a university ethics committee.

Secondly, psychology, as Miller acknowledged in 1969, traditionally espouses two aims: to advance as a science and promote human welfare. As science, psychology strives to be value-free — and so is exonerated of the need to worry about social problems. But a discipline that is committed to promote human welfare cannot at the same time be a discipline that takes no responsibility for social problems. The promotion of human welfare is not possible unless one first undertakes an analysis which identifies what aspects of current social arrangements militate against the common good. And to conduct such an analysis, one must be committed to certain values such as equity and justice. Not surprisingly, given this contradiction between its two main aims, psychologists who review their discipline’s contribution to the promotion of human welfare do not like what they see. Many, including Miller, argue that psychology has done more to undermine human welfare than promote it.

Finally, science has a changed role in what Ulrich Beck called today’s ‘risk society’. Traditionally science and science-based technology have been synonymous with progress. Scientific farming, industrialization, the internal combustion engine, air travel, splitting the atom — few scientists who were involved in promoting these achievements doubted until recently that they were doing good, even the highest good. But that was before we became concerned about mad cow disease, GM foods, pollution, global warming, resource depletion and Chernobyl — not to mention nuclear war. Over the last decade or so, the natural sciences have increasingly had to face accusations of having been blind to the detrimental social and
environmental consequences of their single-minded unreflective devotion to so-called progress. This is even more the case in the social sciences, especially ethnography, where 'pure research' may have detrimental effects on the often vulnerable populations studied, both directly and indirectly, through the voyeuristic, patronising, colonising or 'orientalising' frameworks used to interpret data taken from 'exotic' peoples.¹⁶

Sociologists like Beck argue that today's 'risk society' is 'after tradition' in the sense that the formerly nested (one within the other e.g. male occupation with a family's class-position and religious affiliation) time-worn sociological categories of class, labour, gender roles, the family, marriage, childhood, education, scientific knowledge, political action, the distinctions between nature and society, private and public – all have undergone such significant transformation that they pertain more to social arrangements of the past than to the world of today. As a result our life-trajectories have become increasingly 'individualised'; made up as we go along, more and more the product of personal choices, brioîage: Should we get married or just live together? What about religion? Buddhism anyone? Should we have children? You can't? How about IVF? How about we genetically design our children? And who should stay at home to raise them? How about child care? Home schooling? Pros and cons, cons and pros ... And as we get older, should we look younger? How about a new organic diet? A bit of cosmetic surgery? Should we change our job? Retire? Start a new career? Get another degree? Move town? Emigrate? Euthanase?

No analysis of today's society can take the past as its starting point. It must set out from the new realities of today. In fact, according to Beck, the structure of modern 'risk society' emerges most clearly in our own here-and-now individualized anxieties. Without study and interpretation, these remain obscure because it is typical of today's society that its members do not rely on their own experience to make crucial decisions but only on what Beck calls 'non-experience' – external knowledge purveyed by experts. Yet, the more experts we have, the more we see politically-loaded dissension between expert knowledge-claims. As a result,

there are actually two types of science which are beginning to diverge in the civilization of danger: the old, flourishing laboratory science, which penetrates and opens up the world mathematically and technically but is devoid of
experience, and a *public discursivity of experience* which brings objectives and means, constraints and methods controversially into view.\(^\text{17}\)

While it may rely at times on laboratory procedures to cast light on empirical matters, truth is trumped by care and concern in Beck's public, experience-based science— as has been the case in medicine since the time of Hippocrates. The new experience-based science aims to bring out the doubts repressed by standard science, happy to champion the uncertainty of experience as a force of epistemic enlightenment and social liberation. It aims to become 'an 'eye' for realities that are repressed and denied by old thinking and the old institutions.'\(^\text{18}\) In this way, a methodical democratisation of experience becomes possible and scientifically justified in society, without fear of favour for the status quo. Only in this way will a collective language be fashioned that resonates with our experience and can take us forward into the unknown, opening up the possibility of dealing creatively with whatever the future brings.\(^\text{19}\)

The idea that what students need to learn in a university must be contextualised by their experience is fundamental to the concept of curriculum. The idea of curriculum captures the processes that go to produce a particular kind of subject. Hence when we define a set of graduate attributes – for example, that CSU's graduates will be practically-educated, culturally competent, ethical, global citizens, internationalised, understand sustainability, and so on – we imply a curriculum process that will, over the course of their degree, produce these attributes. To define GAs *without* specifying processes of curriculum design likely to produce those GAs pointless. Note, however, that 'curriculum'

refers to the *entire sum* of the experiences students engage in and acquire as a result of learning at university and the factors that create these experiences. This includes explicit, *implicit and hidden aspects* of the learning program, and *experiences that occur incidentally (alongside) the formal curriculum*. The curriculum is intentional teaching, content, assessment and inevitable as well as *unintentional messages to learners created through role modelling by teachers and fieldwork educators*, through assessment schedules, *learning climate, infrastructure (resourcing*,}
facilities, staffing, administrative and support systems), university communities and additional experiences (e.g. sporting, social) that are part of university life.\(^{20}\)

What this definition implies is that the curriculum embraces far more than what happens in the classroom. It embraces the entire culture of the university, including the 'informal' behaviour of academics – the role-models they create. It goes to how academics act, not just what they say or teach.

This puts a sharp new focus on 'campus culture.' If we preserve Miller's split between the private and the public obligations of the academic, then the campus culture students experience is up to them. If students over the years have developed a number of crassly sexualised and intemperate initiation rites for new students, then who are we, the staff, to criticise? In our day, were we such angels? If the nation at large shows a proclivity for binge-drinking, for drug-taking, a bit of racism, a bit of homophobia and a sexualised 'raunch' culture, then, hey, what's the problem with a similar set of attitudes on campus? Surely anything else would be pure wowserism?

But if the way students learn to become who they become includes their 'informal' experiences at university, the 'hidden' and informal curriculum as well as what goes on in the classroom, then we academics need to reflect on the 'unintentional messages' we communicate through the culture that – accidentally or on purpose – meets our students as they join the university community. For this will teach them volumes about the way we enact and understand such things as 'duty of care' and 'citizenship,' about which we wax so lyrical to AUQA.\(^ {21}\) Just as, in The Republic, Plato laid out a scheme for the education of guardians and citizens which went well beyond the trivium and the quadrivium to lay out a coherent set of community moeurs, so proponents of curriculum renewal in the university need to reflect upon how they enact citizenship and care in their own backyard. In this sense, academics need to switch focus from the philosophical principles and normative frameworks they espouse (e.g. as graduate attributes) to the values that are unwittingly or unwittingly instantiated through the practical arrangements that flow from what Wayne Hudson calls the 'actual institutional architecture' that frames their university community.\(^ {22}\)

**Castalia as a Negative Instance**

It is at this point, I believe that theology finds its place within the tertiary curriculum. For whether we be atheists or believers, theologians have
developed a set of concepts that are crucial to the task of living in a deliberative and, by implication, idealistic/values-driven community. Here I am thinking particularly of the Pauline distinction between *sark* (the 'fallen' flesh) and *soma* (the community of Christians unified by Christ's teaching to become 'the body of Christ'), so brilliantly discussed by Bishop John Robinson in *The Body*. To underline the relevance of theology to the post-actuarial university, I will take the scholarly community portrayed by Hermann Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game* as a negative instance of the kind of institutional architecture foreshadowed by my argument.

*The Glass Bead Game* is the biography of Joseph Knecht, a man of great intellectual gifts who has risen to the top of an apparently-utopian elite community of scholars occupying a province called Castalia of a larger country in middle Europe. The social function of Castalia is to educate teachers for the rest of the country, but, from its denizens' viewpoint, this function is very much secondary to their adherence to a super-refined and highly abstracted monk-like life of the mind. The centrepiece of Castalian life is the great annual celebration of a deeply serious intellectual game - the 'Glass Bead Game' - which draws from all walks of scholarship to lead players through three weeks of integrated study, performance and meditation to recognise profound unsuspected harmonies in the universe of learning. This annual ritual, which is described as almost religious in significance, is designed by Castalia's 'Magister Ludi,' the supreme master of the Glass Bead Game, a position Knecht ultimately fills with great distinction for many years. However, Knecht eventually flees Castalia in preference for a life in the 'real world.'

Banned by the Nazis and published in Switzerland in 1943, Hesse's book can be read as a profound critique of the university. The anonymous 'author' of Knecht's biography is puzzled by his hero's flight from Castalia, but throughout the book, we note Knecht's two things. First is his rising dissatisfaction with the 'unreality' of life in Castalia, which is the apotheosis of the Ivory Tower. Castalians have an arrogant disregard for knowledge about the political events in the country of which they form part and, therefore, remain disdainfully ignorant of the financial and social machinations that enable their province to exist. All Castalians are unmarried men and sex plays no part in the book. Social difference does not exist. So both passion and politics are excluded as appropriate topics for Castalian inquiry. The Glass Bead game itself, while aesthetically profound
and intellectually satisfying, is so abstract as to have no bearing on the lives of ordinary people. Furthermore, while Castalians pride themselves on their extraordinary learning, they focus primarily on music, philosophy, mathematics and cultural history and have remained obdurately ignorant of social history and of theology.

A second theme is Knecht's own personal development, or what he calls his 'awakening.' Put simply, he outgrows Castalia. Castalia is hierarchically organised and monastic in discipline. The reason Knecht flees the province is because he needs to continue his 'awakening.' So he feels the need for a less rarified, freer, more real, more passionate life. In fact, the three main characters in the book are 'failed' by Castalia insofar as their personal development is concerned. Knecht's more worldly friend Plinio Designori, who returns to the world after a few years' education in Castalia, is shown to be emotionally bitter and self-destructive – a souring that his experience in Castalia accentuated rather than cured. And Fritz Tegularius, a brilliant if prima donna-ish ultra-Castalian is portrayed as moody, spoilt and stunted through his immersion in Castalian culture.

Two points should be drawn from Hesse's Castalian dystopia. First is the move against Castalian uniformity: the necessity for the university to take difference to its heart, not to erase or homogenise it but to sustain and explore it – to become a community of 'dissensus' rather than consensus, in Readings' words. Second is the need to recognise that universities which talk of citizenship and ethics willy-nilly proffer their students something more than a marketable skill, a training, a professional role. With these words, they are daring to invoke destinies not merely desiderata, vocations more than professions. Unless universities provide an institutional architecture which enacts the message they undertake to instil in their students – whether it be of citizenship, reflective practice or ethical understanding – they will be modelling for their students the attitude described in the Letter of James of the man 'who looks in a mirror at the face nature gave him. He glances at himself and goes away, and at once forgets what he looked like.'
Notes

11. Readings, University in Ruins, p. 23.


21. AUQA is the Australian Universities' Quality Agency – the body responsible for running the ruler of 'quality assurance' over each Australian university every five years.


