The Value Discriminant: How Metrics Threaten Academic Freedom

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I argue that the respective understanding of value discriminates between two forms of 'strong university leadership': one that is incompatible with academic freedom, one that is compatible with, if not necessary for it. The structural evolution of modern science implies that present-day sciences understand their path of knowledge creation in terms of the enhancement of measurable functional control over effects with regard to problems of life. Consequently, measures, parameters, quanta – in short: values – are a condition of 'scientific progress'. If we understand academic freedom as the openness to a fundamental transformation of knowledge, in the domain of value-driven science, the scope of freedom is therefore structurally narrow. However, a particularly pernicious threat to academic freedom arises when scientific practice is controlled by *a-scientific* values. Once a-scientific metrics gain the upper hand over scientific values, academic freedom is out of play. University leaders who cannot discriminate between scientific 'thinking in values' and a-scientific 'evaluating', will likely adhere to the latter. 'Strong university leadership' will then merely consist of the authority to exercise an indiscriminate, arbitrary prerogative in deciding the 'what' and 'who' of scientific research and education. The effects on academic freedom of such 'strong leadership' can only be detrimental.

Although a contract, by which [the enquirer] set himself [a limit for his enquiry], would not immediately amount to saying: 'I want to be an animal', it would however mean the following: 'I want [...] to be an understanding being only up to a certain point; however, as soon as I'll have attained it, I want to be an ununderstanding animal.' (Fichte 2014 [1793]: 19−20)

The question to which I have been invited to contribute asks about the compatibility of strong university leadership with academic freedom. For my own orientation in this question, I must, to begin with, seek a way out from an indeterminate understanding of both 'university' and 'academic freedom'. On that basis I can at least hope to come to some clarity as to the meaning, scope and impact of 'strong leadership' in this context. A substantial part of this article will therefore be devoted to a diagnosis of, first, academic freedom and what it applies to, namely scientific enquiry and teaching, and second, the way in which recent developments in these spheres shape the institution that is meant to be their home and stronghold, namely, the university. While some exemplifications will be given, which relate the diagnostic findings to today's academic life, my answer to the above-mentioned question will not go into details of different models of university governance.

Based on this outline, the article will be divided into four main parts. The first of these will offer a diagnosis of the fundamental orientation and the freeness of present-day scientific enquiry and enquiry-based teaching. In the second part, a diagnosis will be given of systematic derailments from that fundamental orientation, and their consequences for scientific freedom. This will be followed, in the third part, by a brief assessment of the reflections of these developments in the constitution of present-day academia. Finally, the fourth part will be dedicated to some conclusions which this diagnostic picture allows with regard to university leadership. The guiding concept in the following remarks will be the notion of value. Besides providing unity of argument, this notion will be instrumental in pointing out what I believe are crucial discriminations in relation to the issue at hand.

In order to facilitate an understanding of the following remarks, a preliminary clarification is appropriate concerning the term 'academic freedom' and its relation to scientific enquiry. The acceptation of academic freedom found in the European context differs from the one which is common in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, where that freedom is an instance of the fundamental right to free speech. It can be argued that

> in the European tradition, a peculiar relation is established between science and freedom, in that the latter is seen to be crucially dependent on the former: because (free) scientific enquiry (including the education toward such enquiry) is the highest form of the pursuit of freedom, a curtailment of that freedom is considered an attempt on the very 'capacity for freedom' of a political community, hence on that community as such'. (De Gennaro *et al.* 2022: vi)

This understanding of academic freedom, in turn, stands in the tradition of the Greek notion of *scholē* ('free time'), which names the temporal dimension of the philosophical foundation of the *polis* (see further below). In this same tradition, Fichte's reclamation of 'the freedom of thinking' as a fundamental human right (Fichte 2014 [1793]) is a consequence of the unlimited scope of (enquiring) reason, which, in turn, is seen as the constitutive trait of the humanity of man.[a]

To conclude this introduction, I should mention that the conceptual framework and general thrust of this article belong to a common reflection with two colleagues,

Maurizio Borghi and Gino Zaccaria, with whom I am working on a book on contemporary threats to science (Borghi *et al.* 2025).

A Diagnosis of Contemporary Scientific Knowledge

Why is a diagnosis of contemporary science in my view necessary in this context? The answer is: because of its implications for the freedom of science itself and its capacity to face threats to that freedom. As to the latter point, I would argue that the very strength which warrants science's successes, at the same time weakens its capacity to face present threats to its freedom. This is due to two related circumstances: first, the peculiar form of modern science's technical orientation, which undermines its capacity to interrogate its roots; second, the stress on computational thinking at the expense of judgement, where 'judging' implies the addressing of questions of sense.

The two traits by which I propose to describe contemporary scientific practice are 'technicization' and 'societization'. Tracing these two traits to their common origin at the dawn of modernity, and beyond that to the Greek onset of thinking, is a philosophical task that we have just begun to assume, and to which, in my judgement, Heidegger's reconstruction of the genesis and unfolding of metaphysics brings a unique diagnostic light (cf., for example, Heidegger 1961). For our purposes, it must suffice to mention that, at the end of the nineteenth century, Nietzsche (1999: 442) identified 'the victory of method over science' as the outcome of that root-phenomenon of modernity. (For a commentary, see Heidegger 1983: 135–149.)

The word 'technicization' indicates the fact that scientific knowledge becomes entrenched in its modern technical character. Pre-modern science, notably Greek *epistēmē*, is 'technical' insofar as it is based on operative, hence to an extent instrumental, assumptions (or hypotheses) which 'bring to light', determine and make available its theme of enquiry. Such 'bringing to light', however, understands itself as accomplishing a 'naturally' offered reality, which the Greeks call *physis*. By contrast, the peculiar technical character of modern science is that those assumptions operate so as to literally make, or produce, the object of knowledge. That production no longer conforms to a naturally offered reality but overrides any sense of offer. It does so at the behest of a 'will to cognition', which equates knowledge with the power of control. We can reserve the term 'research', as a peculiar form of scientific enquiry, to the retrieval of knowledge from what has been produced for knowledge extraction in this manner. Based on this consideration, only modern scientific enquiry is 'research'.

We do not adequately understand the character of scientific research as long as we think of it as applying ever-more advanced methods of enquiry to the investigation of a given domain of objects. The theoretical style of scientific research consists of formulating concepts and hypotheses in response to an injunction, or rather a will, which demands that, in the first place, reality be produced in an appropriate objective form for it to be investigated experimentally. This objective form implies computability for the sake of testing and control. Scientific practice consists of a

computational modelling of reality in order to functionally explain the components of the model through experimentally tested theories. Successive theories secure the modelled reality to increasing degrees of controllability for the purpose of planned and steered production of measurable effects.

We call this scientific practice 'technicized' (or 'technical in the modern sense'), insofar as the concepts and methods it adopts are not conceived based on an attention to, or experience of, what appears as an in-itself-resting reality, but as tools for going after that reality in view of making it available, via modelling and construction (i.e., thanks to the employment of mathematical tools), for a form of productive scrutiny which, in turn, aims at the empowerment of the production of effects. In other words, the constitutive elements of scientific knowledge (to wit, basic assumptions, fundamental concepts) are now functional to the construction of models which are in their turn functional to that empowerment. The horizon of technicized science is therefore not to 'know the truth' or 'unveil the secrets' – albeit in a 'technical' and operative perspective – of a somehow given reality (i.e., a reality accepted in its offering-itself), but to *fabricate* a reality which is subjected to levels of control as are required by the will to implement processes aimed at producing ever-more powerful effects.

We must, in this context, retain the chasm between 'science' and the kind of thought which, to date, has taken the form of philosophy. The former can be defined as a way of seizing things in view of establishing a knowledge-based formal framework for the effective construction of a world in accordance with a certain manifestness of reality, of man himself, and of their mutual relation; the latter, on the other hand, can be characterized as an attempt to conceive and preserve the genesis and scope of that very manifestness. An attempt of this nature results in what we may call 'knowledge'. Hence, science is knowledge-based in that it does not itself give rise to 'knowledge' in the now specified sense (i.e., as an insight into the genesis and scope of the manifestness of reality), but relies on it, whether or not that knowledge has become explicit in the form of (philosophical) thought.

As previously mentioned, the form of 'given reality' which is decisive for the formation of the concept of science is *physis*, which we commonly translate as 'nature'. A rendering which better indicates its constitutive trait is 'the arising'. *Physis* is the Greek sense of 'being' which informs the whole of what steadily arises into manifestness. Greek *epistēmē* (which we should not translate as 'science' without indicating its peculiar and unique traits) implies a standing up over against *physis* with the intent to recover the ways and forms of its steady arising by means of 'logical' definitions which, in turn, are meant to secure to man the capacity to firmly stand in the middle of beings as a force that presides over them. Philosophy, as the originally defining knowledge, provides the basis for a productive, technical cognizance of *physis*, whose character, however, remains different from the modern 'will to fabrication'. Indeed, the latter is no longer beholden to the initial offer of *physis*, if not for the circumstance that it must still rely on some sort of 'natural input' (for instance, that which is eventually framed as 'particles' made to collide in an accelerator) for the purpose of testing the effectiveness of its models.

Returning to what has now been characterized as 'technicized science', we can resort to a dictum by German physicist Max Planck to indicate one of the constitutive features of that form of cognition, which is important for our topic. Planck says: 'For that which can be measured, that, indeed, does exist' (Planck 1958: 73). The sentence is meant to justify the existence of 'dynamic quanta': these, Planck maintains, can be (quantitatively) measured, therefore they exist. One could argue that this does not imply that *only* what is measurable exists, in that the statement does not exclude forms of existence based on criteria other than measurability. Planck himself elsewhere states: 'Energy itself is not measurable, but only its differences' (Planck 1958: 125), by which presumably he is not implying that energy itself does not exist. However, it remains arguable that, for Planck, direct or indirect measurability is what existence – in its physically relevant acceptation – consists in. Indeed, what other form of existence, which escapes direct or indirect, actual or expectable measurability, would the perspective of mathematical physics allow for?

Much in the same vein, British physicist Arthur Eddington writes: 'The whole subject-matter of exact science consists of pointer readings and similar indications' (Eddington 1928: 252). Planck's and Eddington's statements bespeak that technicized science produces its own object of knowledge by contriving and consequently dealing with what is measurable and calculable, with numerical information, with computable parameters, in one word: with *values*. Scientific research, in the now-sketched distinctive sense, consists of the design, collection, and analysis of values, or, as we say of late: data.

The second trait which, according to this diagnosis, characterizes contemporary scientific practice is 'societization'. This word refers to the following circumstance: what is at issue for science, and what science gears itself to, are problems of societally organized collective life. This is not to be understood as saying: science strives to solve the problems of humanity. Rather, what is meant is this: science is commissioned by the anonymous collective will to life to cater to what that will wills, namely itself.[b] To the extent to which this will informs current public discourse, it goes by names such as 'sustainability', 'resilience' and 'security'. Today it appears obvious that science should investigate reality under the command of the will to life, which challenges and directs us through its 'problems'. The only alternative to this we can think of would be 'science for science's sake', which strikes us as the epitome of idleness. And yet, that orientation on sheer life loses its obviousness if we take at its word that the will to life wills no other end or aim than itself, and that this, in turn, means that it informs and subjects to itself any other end or aim.

Rather than providing a trustable knowledge of a meaningful reality, scientific knowledge gears itself to the sheer will to life. It does so in an increasingly technicized form. Traditional disciplinary boundaries dissolve to allow for ad-hoc-combinations of disciplinary approaches prompted by specific problems requiring customized solutions. New scientific clusters emerge to organize and boost science's problem-solving abilities. We see such clusters listed, for instance, in continuously updated European Research Council Panels (2024). The logistics of

research facilities is adapted to the supply chains and production cycles which serve the search for those solutions. Scientific enquiry itself, in the form of research, as well as substantial parts of training, become components of modular industrial production processes.

The technicization and societization of science is a development that we must acknowledge and, consequently, diagnose. Acknowledging is the practice of letting an appearance rest in the source, or gift, of its appearing: thanks to this practice, that appearance becomes what, to begin with and mostly it is not, namely, a phenomenon. Diagnosing, in turn, is the practice of gathering and naming that source. The diagnosis of the mentioned development brings to light an implication in terms of the freeness of science, which, again, is relevant for our topic. The circumstance that scientific research consists of devising and implementing models of value extraction and processing in response to the will to life implies a reduction of the scope of that practice's inner freeness, notably of its capacity to render its own ground to a crisis. The reason for this is that research is at any time as free as it is open to the initial gift of the phenomena on which it banks for its project of control enhancement. However, performance values as metrics of the will to life are outright a-phenomenic. Data, no matter how 'big' – and despite their etymology – ignore the initial gift of phenomena. Hence, the constraints to the freeness of scientific research geared to performance and, as a correlate, the loss of liberating force in enquiry-based (or, as Kant would call it, 'inquisitive') teaching.[c] The relevance of this narrowing of inner freeness for the issue at hand is its bearing on the condition in which academic enquiry and teaching face internal and external attacks against, or threats to, their freedom. A recent and by all accounts unprecedented form of threat is dealt with in the next part of this article.

Derailments from the Track of Technicization and Societization

As scientific practice, at the behest of the will to life, proceeds on the track of technicization and societization, it grows into the shape of a technique for value processing. This condition has not caused, but arguably favoured in its emergence, a different, but increasingly tone-setting, development, which I see as an aberration or derailment from that track: over the past decades, the sphere of science has fallen into the clutches of a bizarre complex of value-based practices, which, although alien to science itself, are bent on taking control over it. My aforementioned colleagues and I have come to call this complex of practices 'the evaluation machinery', seeing that it mimics the metric approach by which technicized science attempts to establish a mechanics of the natural and naturalized world to contrive a mechanics of sorts of the value of scientific research.

The word 'derailment' translates as *Entgleisung*, a word Heidegger uses to indicate three kinds of aberration with respect to the 'technical essence' of science, which (that essence) is the 'secure track' on which, in his assessment, science itself is set since about the mid-nineteenth century. These derailments are: 'the cultural-

philosophical overstatement of the essence of "science"', 'the theological interpretation of the sciences as a path to God', and 'the epistemological foundation of the sciences' (Heidegger 2015: 388). Based on this diagnosis, the evaluation machinery appears as a kind of 'super-derailment' or 'deranged aberration', in that, as will be argued below, it not only falls short of the 'technical essence' of modern science – as do, for instance, the attempts towards its epistemological foundation – but replaces the latter's truth with an array of proxies which are entirely devoid of scientific meaning.

Evaluative processes consist of devising and carrying through procedures and protocols for the governance of scientific research by means of values which are not scientific. In short: non-scientific values prevail over scientific ones. Evaluative practices make use of quantitative tools; nevertheless, this does not make them scientific. Planck's measures and Eddington's readings are the very 'subject-matter', the conditions for a cognitive endeavour of technicized science. In contrast, the measures and readings of the evaluation machinery are conditions for measurements of performance which strictly have no other intrinsic scope than that of feeding those very acts of measuring. They are performance measures which measure measures of performance measuring.

Because the values of evaluations are non-scientific, the governance of science through the evaluation machinery is a blind flight with respect to the true scientific merit of research. This not only leaves ample space for arbitrariness and different kinds of moral hazards, but quality assessment through non-scientific metrics impacts science in a way that, though arbitrary, is not at all accidental. In fact, accidental impacts are those which may follow from indiscriminate, a-scientific or 'scientifically agnostic' measures, such as equal-share funding schemes. By contrast, policies which execute the directives of the evaluation machinery are not merely a-scientific, but counter-scientific: because their metrics pretend to pass judgement on science as such, they negate, and object to, what is the very source of actual scientific values, namely, the residual freeness of science in theoretical enquiry and inquisitive teaching. The evaluation of science is therefore never to be conflated with scientific judgement. The latter fosters, the former thwarts scholarly endeavours. The hollow rhetoric of virtuosity, on which the evaluation machinery draws, barely covers up this conceptual conflation.

We should now perhaps spell out what concrete practices and values supposedly compose said machinery. A tentative list would include metrics such as citation indices, impact factors of scientific journals, ranking systems for universities, indexes of teaching performance, numerical or type-based thresholds of publications for career advancement, funding schemes for research projects based on non-scientific parameters and the promise of 'policy-relevance', 'temporicidal' quality-assessment exercises, money as career-opener or career-booster, and many more. The criterion for determining the items on this list is always the same: whenever a-scientific values decide the orientation and rank of scientific enquiry, this implies a counter-scientific, value-driven, freedom-quelling derailment from the track of life-value-based technicized science.

The stranglehold of the evaluation machinery on scientific practice threatens academic freedom from the outside. Heteronomous steering of enquiry and teaching with parametric tools and money – based on strategically tailored and rhetorically weaponized 'scarcity' – is arguably more subtle and elusive than outright ideological control. The weaker the diagnostic discernment of the academic community, the more difficult it is to expose the narrative of goodness and progress which cloaks extra-scientific control.

Perhaps the more remarkable phenomenon, however, is the degree to which the so-called 'culture of evaluation' has meanwhile taken hold of the scholarly world *from inside*. By virtue of this 'culture', scholars are led to perceive themselves and their work according to evaluative metrics. They become used to operating based on covenants ('evolved' versions of the 'contracts' mentioned in Fichte's quotation in the epigraph) which define the scope of their enquiry in terms which do not flow from that enquiry itself but from the policies it should help to devise. They not only surrender and adhere to but often emphatically champion, not only aid and abet but at times militantly enforce, the suppression of scientific freedom. Any perplexity, reluctance or resistance is soon engulfed by the routine of clocked controls and tedious accountancy. Were we to take a diagnostic snapshot of present-day academic business, its caption could likely read: 'Scholars repelling *scholē*'.

The Greek word *scholē*, from which English 'school' and 'scholar' are derived, is usually translated as leisure, rest, idleness, free or spare time, time of study, school. It is understood as an interval of a certain duration, within 'the flow of time', which is not occupied by attendance to some necessary business. However, *scholē*, rather than being based on an understanding of time as a directional sequence of elapsing moments (i.e., 'time's arrow'), is itself an original notion of time: *scholē* indicates the respite, consisting in the offer of the toward (i.e., 'present') simultaneity of past and future, in which the sense and meaning of things is generated and becomes accessible to our several forms of response. Accordingly, Plato (in his *Critias*, 110 a) and Aristotle (in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, X 7) state that, respectively, philosophy and theoretical life – and therefore the entire project of the *polis* – are based on *scholē*. It can be shown that all forms of encroachment on academic freedom, be they external or internal, ultimately consist of an attack on or the outright annihilation of *scholē*.

A key role in masking the takeover of science by the evaluation machinery is played by the figure of the (typically 'blind') peer: since after all it is mostly scholars (our colleagues, we ourselves) who occupy logistic positions and operate as interfaces of the machinery, the semblance can be maintained that the system operates based on scientific criteria and in the interest of science. The sobering moment of realization comes when a procedure based on peer oversight or review is finally automatized and handed over to 'artificial intelligence'. It then shows that it was from the outset not the judging peer but the evaluating functionary who was involved in the control circuit as a provisional placeholder for an algorithm.

The combination of self-inflicted and other-inflicted threats to scientific freedom produces a large-scale derailment of modern science from its track of technicization and societization. Most importantly, it obnubilates the implications of these

momentous developments, and the decisions they hold in store. Who, indeed, could afford to muse over, or initiate a dialogue on, the character of what today is seen as the very hallmark of scientificity – to wit, scientific success measured in terms of control of reality at the behest of the will to life – when it is a matter of academic survival to ceaselessly replenish evaluative assets, which, as they counterfeit such success, dwindle by the hour? The effect of this derailment is particularly pernicious with regard to young academics. Mostly, they are no longer taught that scientific interrogation must proceed only based on the indications generated by the quest for truth. Most of what they are required to do does not train a habit of freeness. Mostly, they understand that a scientific endeavour – no matter how 'high-risk', 'prone to failure' or 'curiosity-driven' – must meet pre-set evaluative standards to be allowed to exist. On the whole, they realize that, to have citizenship as members of today's academia, they must acquire skills and attitudes once seen to be typical for sophists.

Present-day Academia

As a result of the outlined developments, today's universities are characterized by a peculiar form of heterogeneity and an insidious ambivalence. The interplay of these two traits shapes the planetary academic landscape. Clarifying what this means requires a brief return to the notion of university.

The modern idea of university involves a simple architecture. Its foundation is provided by a unifying unity that has the form of an origin. This *unum* is philosophy as a practice of freedom. From that origin spring different forms of knowledge, which are meant to substantiate the origin whence they spring thanks to the manner in which they refer back and towards it – in Latin: *versus*. These forms of knowledge are the sciences. The whole formed by the sciences turned *versus unum* is the university. A classical formulation of the idea of university as a whole of sciences, based on the unifying unity of the unique acknowledgment of the *unum* (here 'the absolute'), can be found in Schelling (1990). While I am not a historian of universities, I surmise from a philosophical vantage point that this idea of university was pursued roughly until the first half of the nineteenth century, before being abandoned in the second half of that century and finally coming to an end in the first decades of the century just past. A newly conceived project of university is yet outstanding. Conceiving a notion of 'the one' more initial than that of the philosophical tradition is a pivotal task of present-day thought. Absent that notion, the very sense of 'knowledge' and 'science', hence also that of 'academic freedom', is bound to remain hollow and arbitrary.

As the unifying force of a practice of freedom is missing, the 'unity' of universities is today given by common operative governance through centralized administrative structures, which pursue the maximum expediency of all 'processes' and 'operations' for purposes of quality control and accountability. The missing foundation of sciences is covered up by the successes granted by their ongoing technicization; in turn, the evaluation machinery, acting as the new *unum* of university, gives a different quality to

the 'cover-up' of, and distraction from, persisting unfoundedness, as it involves a complete detachment from scientific truth. Indeed, what would the 'theoretical framework' of a research project investigating the impact of that machinery in terms of 'scientific truth' look like?[d] At the same time, new, 'cybernetical' sciences emerge, which ostensibly take on the task of reshaping and organizing the older ones to boost their technical and societal productivity; the resulting organizational structures, in turn, provide a novel form of operational 'unity'.

Such streamlining and systemizing of processes gives rise to heterogeneous constructs, still going by the name of universities, in which what are effectively industrial production modules coexist with scope-less replications of traditional scholarly endeavours, and customized technical training schemes run side by side with educational efforts, which retain an inquisitive character in the hope of meeting a new, yet unfelt need. Meanwhile, a formal scientific egalitarianism obtains: seeing that a sufficiently founded notion of scientificity is lacking, the title of 'scientific discipline' is granted based on the respect of accepted academic rituals and the exhibited ability of producing a measurable output value.

The heterogeneity of academic reality intersects with the ambivalence which results from the alternative between following the 'firm track' of technicization, hence still of science itself, and derailing from that track on account of the evaluation machinery. This ambivalence runs transversally through all domains of scientific investigation: the distinction between instances in which it is still freedom which guides scientific enquiry, and instances of subjugation to evaluative schemes – be they generated within academic communities or imposed on them from outside – does not follow disciplinary boundaries. The intersection of this ambivalence with said heterogeneity produces institutional formations which can neither be 'read' nor, consequently, led, as if they were uniform entities – at least, as long as scientific freedom is meant to remain the principle which informs university governance.

University Leadership and Academic Freedom

Academic freedom consists in the unlimited pursuit of knowledge, rooted in the free dedication to truth and endowed with the autonomy that this dedication requires. In this day and age, this pursuit appears to be informed by the traits of technicization and societization. However, as long as it harbours a spark of freedom, scientific enquiry remains open to be attained, and shaken from the ground up, by a crisis which, among others (and within the limits of his metaphysical position), Husserl diagnosed about a century ago (Husserl 1982); clouded by technical success, that crisis remains largely unacknowledged to this day. Protecting academic freedom means fostering science's capacity for crisis. I believe that today this protection cannot so much as be attempted without the support of a diagnosis of the difference between the value-orientation of technicized science and the value-based practices of the evaluation machinery – in short: without cognizance of what here is called 'the value discriminant'.

Let us return to the question formulated at the outset, which asks about the compatibility of strong university leadership with academic freedom. Suppose that, in the expression 'strong leadership', 'strong' means 'endowed with significant executive power'. We can now argue that a leadership which is strong in that sense, but blind to the mentioned discriminant, is not only incapable of warranting academic freedom, but bound to ride roughshod over it. Bereft of adequate diagnostic tools, 'strong' 'leaders' or governing bodies will give in to the temptation of championing and enforcing the reward-and-punishment system established under the rule of the evaluation machinery, and adopt its forcedly euphoric and underhand, if not outspokenly, menacing rhetoric.

They will ignore the difference between inconspicuous scientific earnest and advertised academic prestige; between the perceptible fostering of free enquiry and learning and parametrically assured, marketed excellence; between the noticeable rigour of interrogation and computed scientific success; between the safeguards of peer judgement and the control exerted by anonymous functionaries enlisted in evaluative peerage; between academic self-administration as an implication of autonomy and the execution of ancillary administrative tasks; between the public use of reason and reasoning in the eyes of the public; between projecting the stakes of a human world which are for the stewards of the *polis* to govern and the indiscriminate 'stakeholderization' of university governance; between gearing science to societization and slavishly catering to uncritically assumed societal demands; between responsibility towards the *polis* and political servitude.

However, 'strong' blind leadership will not only unknowingly ride roughshod over academic freedom by implementing centralized, one-model-fits-all policies targeting a-scientific parameters (for instance, everything and everyone are equally evaluated based on garnered third-party funds), where autonomy and careful discrimination between heterogeneous scientific aims and needs would be called-for. Critically uneducated leadership will remain suspicious of, and hence also actively thwart, a scholarly practice which escapes evaluation, as it must perceive that freedom as a threat to smoothly running processes of quality assessment and reporting, and as disruptive for a self-serving metrical narrative which eludes the responsibility for truth. Destitute of critical tools, that leadership will rubber-stamp ever more invasive and time-killing procedures, and nurture a climate of envy, mistrust and personalization where, instead, unspoken respect and the unassuming light of scholarship and common learning should reign.

Finally, its style of governance will – *mutatis mutandis* – be remindful of what legal scholar Ernst Fraenkel (1941) characterized as the 'dual state': with normative warranties of freedom still formally in place and rhetorically upheld (no announcement involving tighter control measures without lip service to the freedom of science as an 'untouchable value'), such leadership will empower the curtailment of free scientific enquiry through the tools of soft law and prerogatives. In sum, it will be 'strong' only in power, but without orientation or lead regarding the promotion and protection of true enquiry – and therefore not true leadership. In

turn, the entities over which it presides, held together by the interfaced control circuits of the evaluation machinery, will be universities in name only.

Another strong university leadership is indeed conceivable: one in which strength, university and leadership each draw their very sense and consistency from their allegiance to the freeness of science and to the time of free scientific dialogue. That allegiance itself will shape the critical alertness and intelligence which is required to navigate the sea of scientific enquiry amidst evaluative perturbations and surges of extra-scientific interests aiming to gain control of the ship. That alertness, in turn, will enable and strengthen true leadership, which − in academia as elsewhere − is leadership by example. For 'to lead' means to show the way, while following the engaging lead of freeness, to wit, its need for and pre-meditation of human allegiance; and 'to be of example' means to disappear in the act of letting shine the unitary and constitutive trait which is the same for every different and equal fellow who, thanks to that act, finds him- or herself coalescent with others in one and the same endeavour.

Strong university leadership, or simply: university *leadership*, is free from all hierarchy. It consists of exemplary acts which kindle the fire of scientific freedom: the forthcoming memory of that freedom is today the only unifying trait which still allows us to rightfully employ the name 'university'. Whatever power structure or model of governance is in place, it will be compatible with, and uphold a beacon of, academic freedom, if it recognizes and warrants the sanctity of such exemplary acts, thus allowing for true leadership to speak and be heard. Conversely, no formal rule or measure will safeguard the freedom of science, and with it the freeness of our societies, if that sanctity is neglected, infringed on or crushed.

Notes

a. Note that for Fichte the expression 'academic freedom' (as opposed to the freedom of teaching and enquiry) refers to university students' licence to adopt an unrestrained lifestyle (cf. Fichte 1806: 111 sqq.). The same is true for Heidegger, who, in his very plea for the autonomy of the German university, writes the following: 'The much-hailed "academic freedom" will be cast out from German university; for that freedom was spurious, because only negative. It mostly meant mindlessness, arbitrariness of intentions and inclinations, boundless doing or not doing' (Heidegger 1990: 15).

b. The will to life, which only wills itself (i.e., its own willing), echoes the 'will to will', which, according to Heidegger, announces itself in Nietzsche's 'will to power' (Heidegger 1961).

c. Kant (1905) distinguishes between historical and mathematical knowledge, both of which can be learned, and philosophy, which cannot. Since teaching in the domain of philosophy is not about conveying thoughts but about initiating in thinking, the method of instruction, Kant says, must be 'zetetic' (from Greek *zētein* 'to inquire, search after'), i.e., 'inquisitive' or 'inquiring'. While it is true that, on the contrary, academic teaching in the historical and mathematical disciplines is 'dogmatic', in that memory and the intellect must learn what is already 'decided' as to its (respectively, factual or logical) appearance, arguably the pedagogical, freedom-carrying import of that teaching also resides in the degree to which the adopted dogmatic method bears in itself an 'inquisitive' core. In short, teaching is capable of *freeing* to the extent to which it is *philosophical*.

d. The sense in which technicized sciences lack a foundation (i.e., a dimension of truth) is hinted at above in the discussion of the notion of 'university'. If Heidegger's diagnosis is correct, efforts to provide an epistemological (that is, explicitly non-metaphysical) foundation of science, which began in the second half of the nineteenth century and unfolded along the entire twentieth century, are structurally insufficient (hence their qualification as 'derailments').

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