Free-range Poultry Holdings

Living the Academic Life in a Context of Normative Uncertainty

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These days, we see increasing numbers of scholars aspiring to live the scientific life: longing to join academia, hoping to follow their vocation, to make a career here and hone their theoretical skills to perfection. At the same time, uncertainty regarding life as an academic is mounting. This uncertainty may be enforced by the fact that these young scholars are drawn into an unwanted process of (self-)selection. Although the majority of these young scholars would like to remain in academia, the fact is that for every ten there is room in the university for only one or two of them. Research potential surpassing the available budget – this dynamic tends to reduce autonomy, liberty of choice and diversity within the research environment. And young scholars are amongst the first to be exposed to this worrisome trend.

In this chapter, I will present two narratives that seek to outline the academic life and its purpose: the utilitarian 'goose model' and the Humboldtian '*Bildung* model'. We will see that the ideas, goals, and expectations of each model continue to compete for recognition and endorsement. And although one of the two is undoubtedly gaining the upper hand, the values of the other model are essential to sustaining the life of the mind. This conflict of values regarding science and the scientist is precipitating a significant degree of uncertainty in politics, academia, and society regarding the aspirations of the academic endeavour and the norms that (should) hold for these. Students, scholars, and administrators are uncertain about how to act given the diversity of moral doctrines, about how to decide which moral conviction applies when and how – and based on which criteria and whose authority. Our theoretical pursuits are at stake, but who is entitled to decide how best to protect and promote them?

1 *Many thanks to Christoph Baumgärtner, Maarten Prak, and Ingrid Robeyns for their comments and suggestions. This text is the adaptation of the lecture at the opening of the Academic Year at the Erasmus University Rotterdam in September 2015.*

The golden goose

The first story's opening is very familiar: 'Once upon a time there was a goose who laid a golden egg every day'.[2] In 2015, Director-General for Research and Innovation of the European Commission, Robert-Jan Smits, passionately argued to keep the EU's research investment programmes afloat also during times of financial crises. In his words, it would be very unwise to 'kill the goose that will lay golden eggs in the future'. He underscored his admonition by pointing to Finland, which overcame its economic crisis in the 1990s by increasing investments in innovation and research, and to Germany, which has been hitting the ceiling with an extra 18 billion euros for research since the financial crisis began. Compared to these efforts, the EU as a whole does not strike an impressive figure: notwithstanding the common European goal of investing 3 percent of GDP in research, today's figure currently amounts to a meagre 1.9 percent. 'We cannot build a knowledge society if we don't invest in it', says Smits (EU, 2015).

What is interesting here is the language in which Smits' plea is couched and the urgency with which it was made. Using a metaphor taken from Aesop's fable about the goose who laid golden eggs, Smits was urging policymakers, investors, and bankers, even the EU as a whole, to see the current situation in perspective. The scientist as goose, or as the egg, is a powerful narrative, easily grasped, and most probably designed to reach and win the hearts and minds of the power wielders in Europe. Even they should be lured, captivated, and plied by the shine of the golden eggs, and thus refrain from slaughtering or starving the goose. In its crudest form, science and scientists are here to make money, to increase GDP (*Het Financieele Dagblad*, 2015).[3] Or, in a more benevolent version of the same tale, they

2 "A man and his wife owned a very special goose. Every day the goose would lay a golden egg, which made the couple very rich.
'Just think,' said the man's wife, 'If we could have all the golden eggs that are inside the goose, we could be richer much faster.'
'You're right,' said her husband, 'We wouldn't have to wait for the goose to lay her egg every day.' So, the couple killed the goose and cut her open, only to find that she was just like every other goose. She had no golden eggs inside of her at all, and they had no more golden eggs." http://www.storyit.com/Classics/Stories/goldengooseegg.htm

3 Around mid-August 2015, 'Brussels' subsequently announced that it was going to develop novel macro-economic models to better monitor and evaluate the net return of its R&D investments – current economic models consider research and innovation as debit items, with returns projected too far into the future to be calculable, and therefore to be excluded from the credit side. 'EU laat impact innovatie op economie onderzoeken'. *Het Financieele Dagblad*, 11 August 2015.

are expected to solve the problems of humankind: to produce more and healthier food, cure cancer, fight climate change, increase sustainability, and help to achieve the millennium development goals. Indeed, these are all essential values. Take for example Jan Tinbergen, the first and thus far last Dutch winner of the Nobel Prize for Economics. He explicitly subscribed to this utilitarian 'goose model'. For him, government spending on science and education was essential, since they directly contributed to reductions in income inequality. Science policy ought to be designed to reduce income inequality – a veritable blast from the past (Van Rompuy, 1974, p.66).

This functional, or common-sense, 'goose model' underlies many of our academic and research agendas, as well as many NWO programmes, and it most certainly informs the so-called spearhead programme, or top sector policy ('topsectorenbeleid'). There are, however, more stories to tell than this particular Greek fable. From the following narrative, originating in Germany, the uncertainties and clashes about goals and norms that emerge for governments and universities from these stories' incongruences will be explained.

Bildung

This powerful story has recently been enacted in the streets of Amsterdam, where students and staff have gained a certain amount of notoriety protesting against the withering away of the *communitas academica.* Demonstrators, there and elsewhere, were objecting to the strict production and output standards that have been inflicted upon them (and us) over the last decade, when already insufficient budgets were being usurped for campus real estate projects right under their noses. Some of the idealistic rebels were inspired by a longing for the classic ideal of the university as a sanctuary for passionate professors, intellectual interlocutors, and freethinking spirits; for the university as a site for 'disinterestedness' (Robert K. Merton) (Macfarlane and Cheng, 2008).

These protests have been a powerful reminder of the second narrative that can be told about the world of higher education. We could call it the story of *Bildung*; not so much a fairy tale by the Grimm brothers but rather a path with Humboldtian roots. In this story, the university is a place where norms, values, ethics, and ideals are developed, cultivated, and discussed between students and teachers. In the words of our very own Minister of Education: 'Universities and institutions of higher learning are training our future leaders. Teachers, judges, nurses, and architects alike – people who

set the tone for how we engage and deal with each other in our society' (*De Volkskrant*, 2015).

Martha Nussbaum's *Not for Profit: Why democracy needs the humanities* develops this story further (2010). Her plea for *Bildung* offers a model that does not provide us with one-way research paths culminating in clear-cut outcomes – in this case, the 'eggs'. It is a model that particularly values the education of critical and empathic citizens and seeks to equip scholars with critical tools to set out on different routes and in different directions. *Bildung* does not tie in so well with the logic of the neoliberals or the grammar of a capitalist economy; it is rather a model of critical pedagogy for developing individual responsibility, pioneering innovation, and the self-examination of democratic citizens. This model presupposes an open and liberal society; one that does not tell researchers what to do, or at least does not dictate the diversity or direction of their inquiries in detail. Instead, this model challenges and enables academics to use their specific capacities for contributing to the common good, by, for example, monitoring the ethical priorities, normative proclivities, and professional skills of researchers in terms of scientific integrity, or by assessing their ability to teach '21st-century skills'. It considers universities as 'archives of our common knowledge', critical caretakers of the public good, as, in the words of Ingrid Robeyns (in her inaugural address), 'centres for independent thought' (Robeyns, 2015; Hutchins, 2015, pp. 53-54), and as a community or *civitas* where new citizens, ideas, inventions, and potentially innovative initiatives circulate (Schinkel, 2015, pp. 53-54).

Normative uncertainty

Having briefly described these two models, it is necessary to emphasize that *both* are valuable (perhaps even equally valuable). As a historian, I was trained in the ideals of the humanities as expressed by Humboldt and Nussbaum, both at Utrecht and Bonn University, and drilled in the German way of questioning and deconstructing definitions and concepts such as security, terrorism, and democracy. Students in political science or history are still trained to study what sets a democratic charter apart from totalitarian repression – and how easily lapsing into state terror can happen; exactly the kind of insights that Nussbaum wants scholars in the humanities to develop. On the other hand, if I may draw from my own experience as a researcher, while working at Leiden University's Centre for Terrorism and Counterterrorism I experienced true satisfaction from

building concrete terrorism databases and evaluating counterterrorism laws – directly contributing to a common good (in this case security), rather than devoting myself to indirect, self-reflexive critique alone.

The uncertainty mentioned earlier comes into play when we are confronted with a plurality of values and purposes underlying our diverse ideas about scientific life – *and when we have to make choices and don't know how to handle this incongruity.* Do we need to develop better antiterrorism equipment, or should we concentrate more on *understanding and critiquing* the advent of the surveillance state? Many researchers in the humanities and social sciences experience this ambivalence first-hand; that they are torn between these two ways of thinking, seeing them both as valuable. Few of them are probably willing to commit wholeheartedly to only one of these. Few of them would want to retreat completely into the ivory tower. Most of them are willing to make a contribution – directly or indirectly – to the improvement of society, but feel uncomfortable when their work is being completely reduced to this contribution alone.

This conflict of values and purposes, and the uncertainty that often ensues, has gained more salience in the current situation of budgetary constraints caused by the current state of economic and financial crises and cutbacks in government spending. So-called top sectors, spearheads in innovation and research, have been designated and research monies rechannelled into industrial budgets (Valkema, 2015). The NWO, which is one of the main pillars of the (highly productive) Dutch scientific biotope, is going through a process of restructuring. Researchers have increasingly come to rely and depend on large-scale EU programmes, but success rates are declining dramatically, from 25 to 10-16 percent or even lower (Floratos, 2015). In 2015, the NWO success rate in the humanities even touched a disappointingly dismal low of 7.5 percent. Although the NWO is meant to support the natural development of science itself and to accommodate the rise of multi-and interdisciplinary approaches, these dwindling success rates leave the impression within the academic world, especially amongst young researchers, that they hardly stand a chance to launch a career in research. On top of that, the massification, commodification, specialization, and internationalization of higher education (Nowottny et al., 2002; Kerr, 2001; Stolker, 2014) have all left their mark on Dutch universities as well.

Against this backdrop of scarcity, the state of uncertainty occasioned by the plurality of values and purposes is highlighted even more and is too often transformed into relentless competition, which starts to spark real conflicts. In other words, one of these narratives, the common-sensical goose model, has started to 'colonialize' the social subsystem of science

by beginning to evaluate it with the logics of a different social subsystem, that of the economy. Utilitarianism in its crude economic form is becoming the dominant discourse, in society as well as in academia. Scholars and universities are being pushed to the assembly line, pressed to produce preconceived eggs. And it is exactly this imbalance that is troubling. Since the 1960s, Dutch universities' budgets increased, and academia flourished as it provided room for cooperation and competition between scholars, research schools, and universities. Nowadays, the dynamics of competition often prevent any long-term investment in cooperation and are undermining the egalitarian model of this productive Dutch scientific ecology (Prak, 2009).[4] Of course, academics understand the futility of a state of absolute non-interference from the outside. They often benefit significantly from external support to finance, develop, and apply their research. They want to be in touch with society, partly because urgent social problems prompt new research questions. Large-scale infrastructures and laboratories, PhD training and hiring schemes often need to be developed 'from above'; programmes in minor languages require protection and funding (it is a pity none of them submitted research questions to the Dutch National Research Agenda!). But it is an illusion to believe that someone from outside or above can design in advance the next (sort of) 'golden egg' or the facility needed to produce it. Even if such a programme of academic engineering would be successful in achieving particular goals, it would not be conducive to new and surprising developments and outcomes.

In short, the problem is not the plurality of values and purposes itself, but the attempt by one of these models to overwhelm all of the other visions of academic life that our open, liberal, and pluralistic society has to offer.

The academic life

The first step to restore this imbalance is to acknowledge and defend the diversity and richness of the academic lives at stake here, and to counter moves that might have one vision monopolize all others. Many dedicated academics, university boards, and organisations, like The Young Academy, have already made this agenda a priority.

Academic life cannot be regulated from above. Scholars do not stand orderly in line – not in real life, and not in history. Science is never tidy, unified, or simple. Academics live in a multiform community. Some academics adopt

4 Interview with Hans Clevers, *Maarten!*, April/May 2015, p. 47.

the role of modern-day prophet, moral commentator, or priest in public service, unleashing warnings about levels of pollution, climate change, and terrorism, or drawing attention to social fissures, sometimes even courted as charismatic truth speakers in a world of uncertainties (Shapin, 2008, xv). Other scientists work hard to plan, secure, engineer, develop, and cultivate natural and social environments. They comment on migrant streams, research brain development, or improve economic education. Still others serve science and society alike in their laboratory, for example to map and identify new viruses.

All these scholars belong together, in one university and one academic community. Selection and prioritization does not enrich the flock's environment, it only impoverishes it. Different scholarly personae are, according to Herman Paul, 'characterized by different constellations of virtues and skills or, more precisely, by different constellations of commitments to goods (epistemic, moral, political, and so forth), the pursuit of which requires the exercise of certain virtues and skills' (Paul, 2014, p. 348). Instead of prescribing outcomes, results, and products, what would really be beneficial is aiding and abetting these skills. Any story about academic life has to commit itself to watch over this invaluable academic ecosystem (Knottnerus) and to shield it against any attempt to tear it apart.

Tend the flock

Our interlocutors past and present – Aesop, Humboldt, Nussbaum, and others – have enough advice to offer to help us come to terms with the normative uncertainty that renders our lives so complicated today. Based on their stories, a case could be made to improve the balance between the two models outlined above – not to defend well-vested interests or privileges, but to protect the reality that academic space and variety are 'necessarily instrumental' (Robeyns, 2015) to keep academia alive and have it serve society as it should. Here are some suggestions to help create more space for diversity in academic life, and to facilitate a 'balance of power' by protecting the *Bildung* model from questionable preferences for the goose model:

– Protect the young geese. A sustainable research environment is all about stimulating young talent and enabling untied research (in the Netherlands: increase the budget of NWO's *Vernieuwingsimpuls*).
– Tend the flock. Knowledge bearers do not dwell well alone. Rat-race dynamics increases stress and wears down flock fertility; whereas a Brady Bunch of scholars of all kinds of feathers and colours will aid

fecundity nicely. Ergo: Increase the number of individual PhD positions at the department level, rather than embed them in large-scale grant programmes at the national or international level.
– Feed the flock. Ergo: Sow seed money with broad strokes to stimulate diversity and surprise, with no advance prioritization or selection of disciplines or themes.
– Feed generously. EU's standards of scientific funding have fallen below the 3 percent mark in both the Netherlands and other countries. Grant success rates have to surpass the 18 percent mark in order to prevent research from becoming a lottery.
– Organise free-range poultry holdings. In line with Ingrid Robeyn's investigations into the workload of academics (Robeyns, 2015)[5], give researchers the time they need to think and to write, and to take time out now and then. Ergo: Implement the Anglo-American sabbatical whereby every six semesters with a regular teaching load, upon approved application, one is entitled to one sabbatical semester of research.
– Don't discriminate. Universities need talented teachers as much as they do research geniuses, media darlings, and administrators. Ergo: Encourage public and academic service by conferring awards (yes, with a monetary incentive) for good teaching, scholarly achievement, and media presence.
– Let the geese loose. Ergo: Stick to the Haldane Principle, i.e. accommodate the idea that decisions about what to spend research funds on should be made by peers rather than by managers or politicians (cf. Kan, 2014).[6]
– Acquaint others with the flock: Sell first row seats to politicians, managers, and captains of industry, allowing them to contribute to lectures or to enjoy a research internship within research groups or laboratories – in order to demonstrate the value of the *Bildung* model from within.

Group portrait with scientists

Hopefully, the National Research Agenda (*Nationale Wetenschapsagenda*, NWA) will be able to highlight and help to protect the varieties of and diversities within academic life in the Netherlands. The Ministry of

5 This is her – highly timely – appeal to social scientists to launch statistical investigations into scientists' workloads in the Netherlands.

6 This principle is named after Richard Burdon Haldane, a British official who in 1904 and from 1909 to 1918 chaired committees and commissions that recommended this policy.

Education launched this plan to facilitate links and connections between various research agendas and to help identify pressing questions posed by the Dutch populace that deserve further research. The chairs of the NWA Steering Committee think that it is also important to turn this initiative into a platform that demonstrates what scholars here in the Netherlands are already capable of – and why they need and deserve more resources. The NWA has been able to showcase the wealth of questions coming from the general public, as well as to suggest possible ways in which Dutch scholars can best address these questions. The NWA calls for diversity within and protection of our academic ecosystem, not just to produce more 'eggs', but also – in line with Nussbaum – to enhance our society's ability to think critically, to educate knowledgeable and empathetic citizens and to deal with complex global problems.

Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, the NWA functions as a vehicle for combining the two above outlined narratives, it serves as a platform for connecting different types and approaches of and to research. Among the 12,000-plus queries submitted online, many asked questions having to do with the origins of mankind, with society's resilience, with identity, democratic citizenship, and the need for spirituality and religiosity. Utilitarian motives did not predominate. The NWA explicitly intends to honour these pressing questions, and where possible will help appropriate parties to rise to this challenge.

Germany we are not – spending 18 billion euros and buying off critique from the humanities and other corners. But perhaps subsequent government coalitions could take a look at Finland, a small country that managed to seriously invest in a knowledge society even in times of severe crisis. Golden eggs rolling off an assembly line might speak to some, but coming to knowledge does not, nor do those who harbour, garner, and cultivate its growing belong to the realm of fairy tales. Neither should these fertile 'geese' be confined to/by large-scale poultry halls.

In this chapter, a case has been made for regulations protecting and enabling knowledgeable, informed, well-staffed, and knowledge-seeking communities – laboratories, research and development departments, and universities alike (as heterogeneous, complex, and multiple as they may be). Historian Lorraine Daston argued that the history of science provides a unique self-portrait of Europe. She said that 'no other culture has relied so heavily on the history of science to define its own identity. Since Europe became Europe in its own eyes, science has been held up as its image and its emblem – whether understood as inexorable progress of vertiginous change or tragic loss of tradition' (Daston, 2005, p. 30). Society would do

well to harbour and nourish variety within academic life, and uphold an openness and correlative degree of unpredictability, regarding the plurality of goals and purposes that need to be retained within the halls of the academy.

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