Wisdom's Limit: Truth, Failure and the Contemporary University

Jeff Malpas

Towards the end of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, a book that deserves to be much more widely read than it actually is, Adam Smith argues in favour of a certain modesty that ought to belong to human reason—a modesty of focus as well as of capacity:

> The happiness of the great system of the universe, however, the care of the universal happiness of all rational and sensible beings, is the business of God and not of man. To man is allotted a much humbler department, but one much more suited to the weakness of his powers, and to the narrowness of his comprehension: the care of his own happiness, of that of his family, his friends, his country […] The most sublime speculation of the contemplative philosopher can scarce compensate the neglect of the smallest active duty. (Smith 1969, p. 386)

What Smith asks us to attend to here is a conception of thinking and the responsibility that attends upon it that recognises the necessary limits of thinking as well as the grounding of thinking in the domain established by those limits. Significantly, one might say that what Smith is actually alluding to is itself a form of wisdom—a sense of what constitutes the proper exercise of reason undertaken with regard to the capacities of human beings, the place in which they find themselves, and the rightful objects of their concern. Yet it is wisdom understood in terms of a notion of limit that belongs to wisdom itself, as well as to reason wisely deployed.[1] Wisdom seems the right term to use here precisely because what is at issue is no mere knowing, but rather an attentiveness to ignorance as well as to the possibility of failure, and so also an attentiveness to the essentially bounded and

[1]Smith's concern is with the ethical, but one might say that the concern with the limits of reason that is at issue here adumbrates Kant's later concern with the limits or bounds of reason in an epistemological and ontological sense.

J. Malpas (✉)
University of Tasmania, Tasmania, Australia
e-mail: jeff.malpas@utas.edu.au

J. Malpas
Latrobe University, Melbourne, Australia

M. A. Peters et al. (eds.), *Post-Truth, Fake News*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-8013-5_5

localised character of our capacities and concerns (the latter in the sense that those concerns take their force and meaning from the concrete situations in which we already find ourselves). It is on this idea of wisdom as it stands in relation to limit, specifically as both might be relevant to the contemporary university, and also, though indirectly, to philosophy, that I want to focus.

Smith makes no connection, in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, between what I have here called 'wisdom' and the university. He does talk elsewhere, namely, in *The Wealth of Nations*, about university education, along with education more generally (Smith 1999, pp. 348–403), and his comments have been taken to support a largely market-oriented model of the university (Teixeira and Dill 2011, p. viii). Yet not only does Smith's conception of the market diverge in many respects from contemporary conceptions, as does his overall approach to both economics and society, but his discussion of education makes little attempt to offer an account of education as such, and certainly involves no real reflections on the nature of the university as such (though he does consider the development of the philosophical curriculum and different historical systems of education). Smith's comments are mostly focused around, and are heavily determined by, what he perceived to be the deficiencies of the educational institutions of his time and the need to bring about reform. He complains especially of the poor quality of teaching, which he puts down to what we might think of as the lack of connection between payment and performance. Of what underpins the university, and how that might be connected with the structure of such institutions, Smith has, however, little to say, and one cannot assume that he would have been any less critical of the corporatized universities of today than of the universities of his own time. It is not Smith's comments on education in *The Wealth of Nations* that seem to me to be most instructive or most relevant to the situation of the university today, but rather that notion of limit and its connection to what I have termed 'wisdom' that appear in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (although both limit and wisdom can, it seems to me, be brought into important connection, as will be evident below, with some of the other ideas that are at work in *The Wealth of Nations*).

So far as wisdom itself is concerned, outside of its commonplace appearances within new age and self-help literature, the notion is not one that commands much attention in contemporary thinking.[2] And although it is sometimes adverted to in educational discussions, there is relatively little recent literature that takes up the idea of wisdom as part of any genuinely critical engagement with contemporary higher education.[3] Moreover, on some of the few occasions when wisdom is taken

[2]Although, as I note in the discussion below, it might be argued that it is taken up, if sometimes problematically, in the idea of *phronesis* or practical wisdom.

[3]Though see Ozolinš' (2013, 2015) work. In the latter publication, Ozolinš (2013) argues for similarities in the views of Peters and Newman on education and specifically for both as committed, in spite of the fact that neither uses the term, to a conception of education as essentially oriented to the cultivation of wisdom. Ozolinš aside, there is a larger body of work on wisdom in higher education, but little that has appeared in the last decade—in relation to that older body of work see, e.g. Barnett (1994).

up, it is often in ways that assimilate it to an existing utilitarian and vocational discourse—as it was in an Australian discussion in 2012 when it was treated as something like an additional competency or skill relevant because of its importance to the employability of graduates.[4] The most famous discussion of higher education of the last hundred or more years, Newman's *The Idea of the University* (Newman 1927), though it makes no explicit mention of wisdom, nevertheless seems to assume something like that notion in its emphasis on education and knowledge as tied to the formation of character. Newman argues that knowledge is its own end that there is no other good to which it is subordinated—nothing else to which it is accountable—and that, therefore, the basis of the University is not any *practical* utility to which it may give rise, but its commitment to knowledge as a simple and fundamental good. For this reason, Newman regards education, which he distinguishes from the training or the gaining of skill, as also without utility—education, like knowledge, accounts for itself.[5] Certainly, education is essential to sociability and to the formation of a society, but this is not to be construed as one of the *uses* of education. Instead, education and sociability are already bound together—the one does not serve the other, so much as being already part of the other (and the reciprocity here goes both ways—something suggested by the hermeneutic notion of conversation as central to any and all forms of understanding). The university can thus be understood, through the focus on education, as given over to the cultivation of wisdom—the pursuit of knowledge turns out to be one of the ways in

[4]See Schwartz (2012). Although Schwartz shows no awareness of the potential tension in his championing of wisdom as an 'employability' skill, elsewhere (2006) he argues for the importance of values, rather than any utilitarian purpose, as necessary to underpin the role and mission of the university. At the time of his comments on wisdom, Schwartz was Vice-Chancellor of Macquarie University, and prior to that had developed a reputation as an aggressively 'reformist' Vice-Chancellor at Murdoch University, in Western Australia, and then at Brunel University, in the UK—here 'reform' means, of course, the promotion of a corporatist and market-oriented conception of higher education. One might thus argue that not only is there an odd tension internal to Schwartz's position (especially his championing of wisdom as an employability skill), but that this reflects a tension between some of his public commentary and his actual practice as a university administrator—a practice that led, during his time at Brunel, to his being one of the top ten highest-paid Vice-Chancellors in the UK and his nomination by the academic teaching union as the 'UK's worst boss'. Such tensions, and the superficiality of discourse that accompanies them, seem characteristic of much of the rhetoric that comes from contemporary university administrators, politicians and governments with regard to the nature and role of universities, and university teaching and research. One conclusion that might be drawn from this is that the rhetoric is just that—*mere* rhetoric—and that it both reflects an emptying out of genuine discourse as well as being a means to conceal or promote quite different agendas and directions.

[5]Newman's position was one shared by Mathew Arnold and, as I note below, by John Stuart Mill, but opposed by Thomas Huxley—see Silver (2003, pp. 4–5). To side with Newman et al. on the issue of the fundamental non-utility of knowledge or wisdom is not, of course, to take sides with Newman and against Huxley with respect to all of the points in dispute between them. Indeed, Huxley also emphasised the independence of the pursuit of knowledge from all practical considerations: 'the primary business of universities is with pure knowledge and pure art—independent of all application to practice; with progress in culture, not with wealth' (Huxley, quoted in Halsey 1958, p. 148).

which wisdom is developed, and, indeed, the pursuit of knowledge cannot be undertaken except against that background.

Although Newman pays no attention to the university as a research institution, the idea of knowledge as intrinsically rather than merely instrumentally valuable can be applied to knowledge in a research as well as educational context (and that idea can be affirmed even if one does not accept the entirety of Newman's 'idea' of the university). Such a view of knowledge, and so also of wisdom, stands in clear contrast to the more commonplace contemporary treatment of for their valuation as based in utility—including employability. Indeed, although often derided, the emphasis on the pursuit of knowledge, of education or of wisdom *for their own sake* remains a key point in the understanding of the nature of the sort of work that universities undertake or ought to undertake.

The pursuit of knowledge, and the promotion of education and wisdom, cannot be maintained by focusing on any system of rewards or punishments that lie outside the enterprise of knowledge or wisdom as such. In his own discussion of education, however, this is something that Smith (1999, pp. 348–349) himself seems more or less to reject, and indeed, there is a widespread view, shared by many in business and government today, that financial incentives, and the competition associated with those, are the only means to ensure performance in any field of endeavour. Yet as many empirical studies show, motivation, even outside of an academic context, is actually more complex than this sort of commonplace thinking assumes (see, e.g. Pink 2009). Systems of financial incentive and disincentive, taken on their own, have little effect in relation to those modes of performance in which the emphasis is on qualitative rather than mere quantitative results, and the imposition of targets often has the effect of depressing achievement rather than raising it. In the case of academic work, the effect of extrinsic motivation of the sort afforded by financial incentives or disincentives seems especially diminished in comparison with the intrinsic motivation associated with academic work itself (something reflected in the fact that so many academics continue to be productive researchers even after retirement). Part of that intrinsic motivation comes from the pleasure associated with intellectual work when undertaken in the right environment. Yet it is undoubtedly also true that genuine academic industry is driven, and primarily so, by the valuing of knowledge, truth and wisdom in and of themselves, and the valuing of the critical engagement that is intrinsic to them and that is the only genuine means by which their pursuit can be promoted. To attempt to drive it by any other means is likely to distort, to mislead and ultimately to undermine. This general conclusion has the important additional consequence that the one thing that matters in the valuation of epistemic success is epistemic success itself, and the only proper gauge of such success is the epistemic community in which it arises. The argument here is, I would say, parallel to the argument that operates in the ethical domain in which any justification for ethics can only come from the ethical itself: even where prudential considerations converge with ethical concerns, such prudential considerations are strictly irrelevant to any ethical imperative whose force is absolute. The ethical, in this sense, is entirely separate from the realm of the useful. To put matters slightly differently, in terms Sandel (2012) can be seen to employ in *What Money*

Can't Buy, value is separate from price.[6] An analogous point, I would argue, applies to the understanding of wisdom.

Of course, the way of thinking to be found in Newman, and more generally, the idea that knowledge or wisdom might account for themselves is a way of thinking that goes against almost all of the thinking that drives contemporary university management, policy and structure. Such thinking is not driven by considerations of knowledge, wisdom or truth, but by a much more utilitarian calculation, and one that also assumes the pure monetization even of utility. This is true whether or not one looks to the contemporary university's treatment of research as valuable only if it delivers outputs that are relevant to university ranking exercises (no matter how well-founded or relevant those exercises may be to underlying academic values) or the reduction of contemporary university education to what is little more than vocational training, itself measured in terms of the acquisition of discrete 'competencies'. This way of thinking comes from one source and one alone, not from philosophy, nor even from economics, but from a sector of society that, although it is often assumed to drive economics, is actually driven by it, namely, business and government—the latter being now so tied to the interest of the business sector as to be little more than a servant of it and a mouthpiece for its interests. It is a situation made even worse by the fact that so many contemporary politicians are themselves personally invested in the business sector both financially and socially—the Trump presidency, not unlike that of Silvio Berlusconi in Italy, providing one of the blatant and extreme exemplifications of this phenomenon.[7]

Leaving aside the questionable nature of the source from which the demand for the accountability of knowledge and wisdom in terms of their utility comes (a source that is both partisan and self-interested), the very idea that there is a limit to the relevance and applicability of utilitarian conceptions invokes the same idea of limit that I have suggested is at issue in the idea of wisdom. Only the fool (and I use this term in that specific sense of one who is 'unwise') would fail to recognise such a limit. The idea that the understanding of limit, whether in this specific case or more generally, is what lies at the heart of wisdom is not, of course, new or unprecedented. It is already suggested by the idea of Socratic ignorance—'I know

[6]To some extent, this distinction may also be seen to mirror that between 'substantive' and 'formal' rationality—see, e.g. Weber (1947, pp. 184–186) who argues for the limitations of markets as instances only of formal rationality.

[7]Here, as in so much else, contemporary practices and conventions operate entirely against the advice of Adam Smith. With respect to any public proposal that comes from what we would now think of as the business sector—what Smith refers to as the 'dealers' or the order of men who 'live by profit'—Smith urges that such proposals 'ought always to be listened to with great precaution, and ought never be adopted till after having been long and carefully examined, not only with the most scrupulous, but with the most suspicious attention'. This is for the simple reason that, as Smith says, the interest of the 'dealers' is not the same as the interest of the public, and the former have indeed 'an interest to deceive and even to oppress the public, and … accordingly have, upon many occasions, both deceived and oppressed it' (Smith 1999, p. 359).

only that I do not know'.[8] If Socrates is in any sense an exemplar of wisdom, it is because he is so acutely aware of the limits of his knowledge. In a somewhat a more brutal form, the same point appears in an old joke that the quality of mind most likely to lead to happiness is 'stupidity', since if you are stupid, you won't have the wit to know it, and so will not be made unhappy by it—or by any of the other things that your stupidity will prevent you from recognising.

The importance of limit here—of the limit that belongs to wisdom, and the failure to grasp limit that is the essence of foolishness—derives from the simple truth that no matter how much knowledge one possesses, there is always more to know—even if it is simply knowledge of the particularities of one's own peculiar or idiosyncratic situation. Yet such limit is not merely epistemic. The ubiquity, indeed inevitability, of failure in practical matters—whether at the governmental level or at the level of personal affairs, provides a different example of the absolute centrality of limit. In all our efforts to control or manage the world, and aspects of it, the fact that any part of the world, let alone the world itself, will always exceed our capacity to manipulate or even represent it means that all such efforts are doomed, in any run other than the short, to fail. Failure is the rule, not the exception, although much of our activity is predicated on the reverse holding true (see Malpas and Wickham 1997, 1995). The fact that we often fail to notice the failing character of our enterprises and projects is simply a function of the fact that we constantly readjust our measures of success according to the realities of our failures. Failure is thus avoided by the redefinition of success, and yet failure is thereby also obscured, hidden, denied. Yet failure is the inevitable accompaniment of all human activity. As Samuel Beckett (1999, p. 7) understood, it is not a matter of failing and then trying until one succeeds, but of failing, failing again, failing better.[9] To recognise the inevitability of failure is to recognise the essentially limited character of human life and activity.

The refusal of such limitation, and the assumption of the ever-present possibility of success, is, I would argue, one of the key features of modernity. Modern technology, in particular, presents itself as a source of solutions, rather than of problems, and technological development appears as a steady progression—a process of 'continuous improvement', as the language of 'quality management' would have it. Yet as technological systems become more complex, the failure of those systems

[8]See Plato (1966), 23b. Socrates also comments on the wisdom assumed by the craftsman who, 'because of practicing his art well… thought he was very wise in the other most important matters' (Apology, 22d)—an observation that today probably applies best to the contemporary CEO, though in this case, it is probably less the capacity to practice one's craft well that leads to the presumption of wisdom, than the mere possession of wealth and status.

[9]Becket's line, 'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better', is often quoted as if all Beckett intended was a sort of rephrasing of the old saying 'if at first you don't succeed, try, try again', which would suggest that the emphasis is on failure as a pathway to eventual success, but this is clearly not Beckett's intention. Indeed, if anything, the line aims to subvert the original saying to which it perhaps alludes, the emphasis being on the inevitability of failure, and the recognition of that inevitability as nevertheless founding action. The human life is thus a failing life, but a life whose failure does not entail surrender.

becomes an increasing problem. The simpler the technology, the more easily can breakdowns within that technology be coped with—the more complex the technology, the more even small failures give rise to difficulties. At the same time, the increasing complexity of technological systems—their very character, in fact, in drawing more and more elements into their sway—also increases the possibilities for failure, often requiring the development of new technologies designed to deal specifically with such possibilities.[10] This is not to say that technology is unsuccessful, but that its success is always faltering, and always brings new problems, new difficulties, in its train. Yet technology hides its own failing character, in this regard, viewing its failures as an indication of the need for greater technological perfection, of a more encompassing grasp of the elements that comprise the technological system, and shifting the focus on the 'problem space' in which it operates, so that technological success is always measured with respect to just those aspects in relation to which technology is successful, while neglecting or ignoring those aspects in relation to which it fails. The limit is most often understood as a negativity; yet in reality, it is the opposite: it is the very source of positivity, since it is the source of that which is valuable. The limit is that which allows things to appear as salient in the same way that the wall constitutes the room at the same time that it also delimits it. In this sense, the limit is not, to quote Martin Heidegger, 'that at which something stops but… that from which something begins its presencing' (Heidegger 1971, p. 154).[11] The limit is constitutive rather than merely restrictive. This is as true of the human propensity to failure as it is of fragility and beauty. Wisdom is not merely a matter of an understanding of limit, then, but of an understanding that recognises its productivity.

Inasmuch as education can indeed be understood as a matter of the getting of wisdom, so it is thus also about coming to an understanding of limit. In this respect, Newman's own emphasis on knowledge, even when taken as tied to wisdom, is perhaps misleading or, at least, potentially so. If education, the getting of wisdom, is what the university aims at, then it cannot be an education that consists in the mere accumulation of knowledge. Knowledge as simply a body of things known—of 'information' or 'facts'—is truly useless. It is the recognition of this point that might be said to underpin the idea of wisdom as a certain sort of practical understanding—so that wisdom is what is needed if theoretical knowledge is to be given application, if it is indeed to be useful. This is a way of thinking of wisdom that is supported by some of Aristotle's comments regarding *phronesis*, and it is also an idea present in the widespread contemporary appropriation of the idea of wisdom as

[10]Although some of their discussions are now a little dated (especially in relation to computing technologies), two books that still provide useful and important analyses of the relation between technology and failure are Tenner (1996) *Why Things Bite Back: Technology and the Revenge of Unintended Consequences* and Perrow (1999) *Normal Accidents: Living with High-Risk Technologies*.

[11]The same idea is repeated at several other places in Heidegger's writings.

practical expertise exemplified in the work of Hubert Dreyfus.[12] Such a conception might, however, be taken to suggest a different conception of wisdom from that which I have emphasised in terms of the focus on limit, and so as offering an alternative and competing account (and one that might be more congenial to utilitarian construal). On this basis, rather than taking wisdom to be centred on limit, wisdom would be identical with the sort of practical understanding that enables the genuine exercise of skill and expertise in a specific field, domain or art or perhaps as some generalizable form of this. One might worry that such a conception of wisdom as tied to specific forms of *practical* expertise turns wisdom into a generic term for what are actually different modes of practical skill that are valuable, not necessarily in themselves, but because of their practical utility—as the skills of an experienced carpenter or financial advisor might be thought valuable, not so much in themselves, but more because of the improvements they can bring to our lives. It might also be taken as a sense of wisdom that transforms wisdom into little more than *prudence* (itself a not uncommon translation of *phronesis*), and so as essentially geared towards practical concerns that are nevertheless founded independently of it.

The latter are surely legitimate worries that should indeed caution us against any reduction of wisdom to mere practical expertise. Yet independently of such considerations, it seems to me that there are other reasons for taking the idea of limit still to be a key idea in the notion of wisdom. I would argue, first, that even with respect to forms of practical understanding that operate in relation to a specific field, domain or art, those forms of understanding cannot consist simply in concatenations of otherwise discrete capacities or competencies. Instead, they must be properly unified capacities that operate appropriately in relation to the entirety of the field, domain or art in question—it is this capacity to operate in a unified fashion that marks such understanding off as genuinely an instance of practical wisdom. As it is indeed oriented towards that field of expertise as a whole, so any such wisdom or expertise must also possess a genuine grasp of its own boundaries. There may be a question as to how those limits are indeed grasped, but the mastery of the field at issue can be viewed as a mastery constituted through a mastery of the field or art as it arises within those limits (notice how this conception of expertise is at odds with the competency approach that is so widespread and that itself has little or no basis in any empirical or theoretical understanding of expertise). On these grounds alone, then, even an account of wisdom as a matter of practical expertise need not be inconsistent with an account of wisdom as based in an understanding of limit. Moreover, even if it were allowed that this is one sense of wisdom, the fact that there is such a sense would not rule out the idea of a more basic sense of wisdom of the sort associated with the idea of a fundamental sense of limit that encompasses all our activities—a sense of wisdom that is not tied to any particular field, domain

[12]Dreyfus's first detailed account of practical wisdom or expertise is in Hubert Dreyfus and Stuart Dreyfus, *Mind over Machine: The Power of Human Intuition and Expertise in the Era of the Computer* (New York: Free Press, 1988), but the ideas are repeated and developed over many other publications over the course of Dreyfus' career both earlier and later—see, e.g. Hubert Dreyfus, *On the Internet* (London: Routledge, 2001).

or art, and rather relates to the mode of our being in the world as human or, if it is to be said to be tied to some art, a sense of wisdom as tied to the 'art of living'.

Here, the idea of wisdom as a fundamental capacity for the governance of one's life and activities as a whole through a grasp of the proper limits of that life, and the activities associated with it, connects with another idea that, while not always associated with wisdom, is very often associated with the idea of the university—the idea of *critique*, and together with this also, in terms that are more commonly associated with wisdom, the idea of the commitment to truth. In pursuit of this idea, let me return once again to Smith. It is sometimes pointed out that what Smith argues against in the *Wealth of Nations* is the imperialistic mercantilism exemplified by the developing British Empire as well as by the Dutch. Such mercantilism was associated with the centralised governmental control of markets and trade in the interests of the nation state. In opposition to such mercantilism, Smith argued for a more open and diverse economic system—and with it a more diverse and open social and economic system also. It is the insistence on diversity and openness that lies at the heart of Smith's emphasis on the market and the importance of competition (and so his abhorrence of monopolies and the need for regulation to ensure the proper functioning of the market). Allied to this, for Smith, was also the idea that the virtues that underpinned a healthy economy and society were not those of consumption and the satisfaction of desire, but rather of frugality and industry—of care in the proper use of resources as well as a commitment to real achievement.

Although he does not do so himself, Smith's emphasis on diversity and openness in economic systems can be applied analogously to the enterprise of knowledge, of education, and so also to the understanding of wisdom as tied to limit. There is a strong tendency for the enterprise of knowledge, like the enterprise of wealth, to become monopolistic. This is something that the philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn discusses in his account of the structure of scientific theory and practice. Although emphasising the importance of the 'paradigm' or 'disciplinary matrix' in making scientific endeavour possible, Kuhn (1970) also argues for the necessity, even within such 'paradigms', of allowing for divergence and innovation.[13] For Kuhn, more radically for Paul Feyerabend, and later for Richard Rorty also, a key task is to maintain the diversity and openness of science, which means finding ways to allow and even to encourage dissenting views, to ensure a multiplicity of approaches and to counter the almost inevitable tendency towards scientific monocultures. Something like this idea can also be seen in the work of J. S. Mill. In *On Liberty*, Mill (1974) argues for the importance of ensuring diversity in ideas, which means not allowing the most popular or prevalent ideas and viewpoints to dominate over all others. From Mill's perspective, the attempt to constrain ideas can only have the effect of constraining and distorting the search for knowledge and

[13]In the 'Postscript' to *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* Kuhn (1970, pp. 184–187) argues that this is achieved through the way shared values within a disciplinary matrix nevertheless allow for differences in individual judgments of value—see also D'Agostino (2005, pp. 201–209). The title of Kuhn's (1977) *The Essential Tension* refers to just the dynamic relation between tradition and innovation, convergence and divergence, that is at issue here.

truth. Hence the importance of freedom of ideas and expression, and tied to this also, of freedom to choose one's own way of life (with the important caveat that it should not unreasonably constrain the freedom of others to so choose) (Mill 1974).[14] Mill's argument, like that of Kuhn, can be seen to be based on the idea of the fallibility of claims to know, or better, on a recognition of the limits within which knowledge is itself constituted. The importance of maintaining diversity and openness in the search for knowledge and truth, in Mill and in Kuhn, mirrors Smith's emphasis on diversity and openness, instantiated in the operation of the market, as the basis for any genuine and common wealth—not because the former ensures the latter, but because it is partly enabling of it.[15]

In the university setting, this commitment to diversity and openness has—or ought to have—several obvious consequences. If Kuhn's point about the diversity of evaluative judgment is heeded, then one will refrain from the imposition of measures or frameworks that try unduly to constrain judgment or to impose uniform evaluative structures from above. In keeping with this, one will look to ensure a reasonably diverse field for academic engagement—resisting the tendency towards monopolistic regimes of publication as well as the coercing of academic production into some standardised set of forms, styles or genres. One will also aim to retain of a breadth of disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches—diversity means diversity across as well as within disciplines. Above all, and following the analogous point in Smith, one will resist any attempt to impose the equivalent of the mercantilist (which is to say the corporatist) system in research and higher education that would centralise control of epistemic enterprise and impose systems of tariffs that stifle the free and open movement of ideas. It is not just a form of university-directed mercantilism that is the problem here, but any form of interventionism that seeks to second-guess the way knowledge will develop, or that thinks it can direct knowledge in general in ways that will gear it to national or extra-epistemic interests.[16] Whether mercantilist or communist, such epistemic interventionist must always fail. In the Soviet Union, Lysenkoism was the most spectacular example of the folly of such an approach (Resnik 2009, pp. 67–69), but sadly Lysenkoism remains alive and well today, since it consists in little more than the familiar idea, widespread in contemporary Anglo-Saxon societies, that one should align scientific research, not with *scientific* interests, but with perceived *national* interests. The latter are most

[14]An important influence on Mill here is the work of Wilhelm von Humboldt, and especially Humboldt's (1854) *The Sphere and Duties of Government*. An epigram from Humboldt appears at the beginning of *On Liberty*: 'The grand, leading principle, towards which every argument unfolded in these pages directly converges, is the absolute and essential importance of human development in its richest diversity' (von Humboldt 1854, p. 65).

[15]On the inappropriateness of taking Mill to suggest a direct modelling of epistemic endeavour on the operation of the market, see Gordon (1997, pp. 235–249).

[16]On the problems relating to political interference in research, see Resnik (2009). He makes the interesting comment that 'The most likely explanation of US success in science and technology is that scientists in the United States have greater autonomy than in almost any other country in the world' (p. 66).

often reflections of the personal interests and prejudices of those in power (so are essentially *political* interests), which often means, in the current climate, the interests and prejudices of *business*, and especially big business. Not only does such Lysenkoism depend on the valuing of knowledge for its instrumental usefulness, but also on the idea that the pursuit of knowledge is something that can itself be deployed and directed instrumentally. Once again, what appears here is a failure to understand the proper limits within which the pursuit of knowledge itself operates, and so an instance of the very *hubris*—a *hubris* that is tied to the desire for power and control—that Smith counsels against.

Smith emphasised the need for competition in the economic realm, a competition regulated by the market. In the world of ideas, this idea of competition is often assumed to translate into competition for funding or students, but in fact, it can only mean competition for truth, and allied to that, though essentially secondary to it, the reputational benefits of honour and recognition that go with the achievement of truth. This is the real currency that drives the enterprise of knowledge. To some extent, this can be connected with Smith's emphasis on the importance of frugality and industry. Smith's focus on these ideas is partly based on the moral character associated with such qualities, but we might also say that it involves the valuing of the work of production, of making, which is why I talked about the value of achievement. This is especially important when it comes to knowledge. Sometimes, of course, a deep commitment to some extra-epistemic value—the relief of suffering, for instance—will drive an individual's pursuit of a scientific project or career. But such extra-epistemic values are not always present, nor as they always operative in motivating and sustaining scientific pursuits. In a university or higher education setting, this ought to mean that a key objective should be the formation and sustenance of epistemic communities that will embody and so also support the qualities of diversity and openness, and genuine commitment to epistemic excellence, that are essential to successful epistemic work and production—what we might think of as communities that are themselves oriented towards wisdom as a primary concern. This must apply not only to research but also to university teaching—certainly to that form of teaching on which Newman focuses, and that is not merely about the inculcation of technical skill or informational mastery, and probably to all teaching to a greater or lesser extent.

Such a view of the nature of the academic communities that ought to constitute universities can be seen to be suggested, if not by Smith's own account of the universities of his time, then by his preferred form of economic, political and social order. Smith famously says, and the passage has become so often quoted and misquoted that its original meaning has been almost entirely obscured, that we cannot rely on the beneficence of other economic actors to ensure our own welfare (Smith 1982, p. 119). That is certainly true; we cannot and should not expect others, in the normal course of affairs, to act in *our* interests rather than their own. Yet this does not mean that selfishness, as opposed to self-love, is to be encouraged or endorsed, and nor does it mean that we should take any sort of self-interested action on the part of others as the proper basis on which the welfare of all can be ensured. Smith is quite clear on this point, largely rejecting the view of Bernard de

Mandeville, for instance, that private vice gives rise to public virtue (see Smith 1976).[17] Moreover, the possibility of economic activity itself depends, as Smith emphasised, on the prior commitment of all of us to a moral order to which not only are we already given over in virtue of relations of sympathy, but in which we can and do rely upon others to be, for instance, generally trustworthy and truthful. This moral order embodies the same sense of limit that underpins the idea of wisdom, since it depends on the idea of both the interdependence of human life, its essential relationality and also the character of such life as always operating in a way that is delimited by the actions, concerns and needs of others as well as our own essential fragility and fallibility. In this sense, the moral life, which must also be a life grounded in a certain *human* wisdom, is a life that always rests on the recognition of essential human limitation—and so on the need for attentiveness and responsiveness to the particularities of our situation as the only basis for actions. One of the lessons Smith teaches—a lesson that is underlined by the various crises in which we now find ourselves—is that the economic order is not independent of the moral order that underpins human life as such. When that moral order breaks down, when wisdom is lost, then so too does the economic and social order also begin to disintegrate. This is why Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is not to be construed as a work that is separate from his *The Wealth of Nations*, but as the essential accompaniment to it.

It is perhaps worth noting, once again, the way in which the idea of limit reappears here—the moral order is itself based in a recognition of our own limited capacity, and in a sense of the way in which our own existence is interdependent with that of others. In this respect, the enterprise of knowledge or wisdom is itself based on an ethical order that enshrines basic principles of trust and fairness, and does so because of the way these principles are themselves tied to an understanding of the limits within which human life and activity operate. One of the consequences of this in the university is that it ought not only to lead to a different conception of teaching and research but also a different mode of organisation and management—to one that is decentralised, more flexible and more efficient, since it will not depend on the vain attempt to 'manage' from above through systems of coercion and control, but will rather operate through the internalisation of values and commitments that are themselves derived from the very activities that lie at the heart of the University's existence and that are integral to its operation. It will operate through the internalisation of wisdom in its very structures as well as in those who take responsibility for the leadership and management of the institution. Significantly, this means the relinquishing of a certain conception of what leadership and management might be, and associated with that, a recognition of the way in which critique and truth must indeed stand at the core of university life.

The commitment to critique, and through critique to truth (since without truth there can be no critique), as central to wisdom derives directly from an

[17]In respect of De Mandeville, Smith (1976) writes: 'the notions of this author are in almost every respect erroneous' (p. 487).

understanding of wisdom as tied to limit and the recognition of limit. But it is worth exploring this commitment to critique and truth more closely—in particular, through the way in which it can be understood in terms of an idea that appears in the late work of Michel Foucault. In his seminar on *Fearless Speech*, Michel Foucault develops a genealogy of the practice of truth-telling, *parrhesia*, and the associated questions that surround this practice. Foucault says at the end of these lectures that:

> […] the problematization of truth which characterizes both the end of Presocratic philosophy and the beginning of the kind of philosophy which is still ours today […] has two sides, two major aspects. One side is concerned with ensuring that the process of reasoning is correct in determining whether a statement is true (or concern itself with our ability to gain access to the truth). And the other side is concerned with the question: what is the importance for the individual and for the society of telling the truth, of knowing the truth, of having people who tell the truth, as well as knowing how to recognize them. With that side which is concerned with determining how to ensure that a statement is true we have the roots of the great tradition in Western philosophy which I would like to call the "analytics of truth". And on the other side, concerned with the question of the importance of telling the truth, knowing who is able to tell the truth, and knowing why we should tell the truth, we have the roots of what we could call the "critical" tradition in the West. (Foucault 2001, p. 170)

It is this critical tradition that properly lies, not only at the heart of the idea of the university, so that we might say that the university is based on the idea of *parrhesia*, truth-telling, as a discipline and practice, but also at the heart of the idea of wisdom as I have outlined it here. Of course, in focussing on *parrhesia*, I am also focussing on wisdom as associated with that particular form of action that is speech, but this is an especially crucial mode of wisdom in the university setting. Such *parrhesia* is, it seems to me, something exhibited in a pre-eminent way by Socrates, even when he seems to speak in ways that are imprudent or unwise—as at his famous trial before the Athenian Assembly. Significantly, the parrhesiast about whom Foucault talks may not always appear as careful or mild, since the parrhesiast is above all a critic—one prepared to challenge, to be a troublemaker, even, when that is needed.

If the idea of critique that is at issue here seems to jar with some of our traditional assumptions concerning wisdom, then perhaps that only shows that we have not been sufficiently critical in our engagement with the idea of wisdom itself. Moreover, as I noted earlier, critique is itself bound up with the idea of truth, and the lover of wisdom is also a lover of truth. Truth and wisdom are themselves bound together, and this is made especially clear through an understanding of the essential relation of wisdom to limit. Moreover, if we take wisdom to have a central role in the university, then this must also bring wisdom into close connection with critique, since the idea that critique is central to the life of the university is one that is certainly well-founded within our own tradition. Even if we think of the university as based around knowledge, then such knowledge itself rests on a practice of truth-telling and on the discipline this requires. In this regard, what is most distressing about the situation of the contemporary university is the threat to this critical tradition. As Terry Eagleton writes:

> What we have witnessed in our own time is the death of universities as centres of critique. Since Margaret Thatcher, the role of academia has been to service the status quo, not challenge it in the name of justice, tradition, imagination, human welfare, the free play of the mind or alternative visions of the future. We will not change this simply by increasing state funding of the humanities as opposed to slashing it to nothing. We will change it by insisting that a critical reflection on human values and principles should be central to everything that goes on in universities, not just to the study of Rembrandt or Rimbaud. (Eagleton 2010)

Arendt (2000, pp. 555–556) says that truth has always been hated by tyrants, and the reason is, she says, that truth itself has something tyrannical about it: truth demands our acquiescence; it does not allow us to choose.[18] Wisdom lies in respecting the power that belongs to truth—a power over which we can exercise no control. In this respect, truth is not itself democratic, and yet, precisely because truth tolerates no tyranny but its own, truth is also a powerful force for democratisation—indeed, the freedom demanded by truth, which is freedom *for* the truth and also for the human and the humane is very closely related to the sort of freedom that Smith argues underpins the market and is manifest in the democratic polity he associates with it. In this respect, the threat to the critical tradition is also a threat to the very structures that underpin the wealth about which contemporary politicians, business and economists so often speak, and of which Smith talks in *The Wealth of Nations*.

What I have set out here, then, is not just an account of wisdom within the context of higher education, but of wisdom as it applies *within a society*. The society at issue is one that is founded upon a conception of its own limit—a limit that has its end in truth and in the human. In the passage from *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* with which I began, Smith counsels against the seductions of philosophical speculation, and in favour of attentiveness to the duties of care that lie immediately before us. Such counsel is not a counsel of the parochial or the selfish, but arises simply from recognition of what Smith calls 'the weakness of [our] powers, and […] narrowness of [our] comprehension'. Significantly, Smith does not suggest, contrary to many recent and contemporary economists and political theorists, and the politicians and business leaders who follow them, that the market itself offers any solution to this problem of limit. Indeed, the idea, promoted by von Hayek (1982)[19] and others, that the market provides an information-processing machine that can overcome human fallibility and ignorance might be seen as a variation on that universalising speculation against which Smith warns us—though a speculation that has taken real and concrete form in contemporary 'economistic' thought and practice. The market becomes the machine that calculates what we individually cannot, producing, so we are constantly promised, a better world for all

[18]See Arendt (2000, pp. 555–556): 'Seen from the view-point of politics, truth has a despotic character. It is therefore hated by tyrants, who rightly fear the competition of a coercive force they cannot mo-nopolize, and it enjoys a rather precarious status in the eyes of governments that rest on consent and abhor coercion'. See also Malpas (2010).

[19]See von Hayek (1982, p. 54): '[…] the only possibility of transcending the capacity of individual minds is to rely on those super-personal "self-organizing" forces which create spontaneous orders.'

—and so the machine of the market becomes that which will supposedly ensure 'the happiness of the great system of the universe' at the same time absolving us of attending to (even counselling us against) those 'active duties' that Smith urges upon us. Smith has no such extreme confidence in the power of the market to do what we cannot, instead arguing for a more limited capacity that belongs even to the market (and thus arguing for legislative controls to ensure that markets are not corrupted in their operation and that substantive moral constraints and obligations are not ignored). For Smith, the market is implicitly, like all artefacts of human activity and design, an imperfect, even a failing, structure—which is why we must remain attentive to it, rather than allow ourselves to be simply determined by it.

Here, we are returned once more to consideration of the inevitability of failure, the importance of critique, and so to the notion of wisdom with which this discussion began, and the limit that belongs to it. The society that would embody wisdom is also the society that embodies a sense of its own limit, and, therefore, a sense of its own humanity. Such a sense of limit is only properly expressed in the willingness to engage with the irreducible complexity of the world that presents itself to us in the light of our own failing endeavours and the obligations that derive from our substantive commitments in and to that world. It is in the service of such wisdom that the proper task of the university, indeed, of teaching and research in general, is to be found. It is not a task that can be based merely in the harnessing of the university to any economic or merely utilitarian mechanism.

References

Arendt, H. (2000). *The portable Hannah Arendt*. New York: Penguin.

Barnett, R. (1994). *The limits of competence: Knowledge, higher education and society*. Bristol: Open University Press.

Beckett, S. (1999). *Worstward Ho*. London: John Calder, 1999.

D'Agostino, F. (2005). Kuhn's risk-spreading argument and the organization of scientific communities. *Episteme, 1*(3), 201–209.

Dreyfus, H., & Dreyfus, S. (1988). *Mind over machine: The power of human intuition and expertise in the era of the computer*. New York: Free Press.

Dreyfus, H. (2001). *On the Internet*. London: Routledge.

Eagleton, T. (2010, December 18). The death of universities. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/dec/17/death-universities-malaise-tuition-fees. Accessed January 12, 2018.

Foucault, M. (2001). *Fearless speech*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).

Gordon, J. (1997). John Stuart Mill and the "marketplace of ideas". *Social Theory and Practice, 23*(2), 235–249.

Halsey, A. H. (1958). British universities and intellectual life. *Universities Quarterly, 12*(2), 141–152.

von Hayek, F. (1982). *Law, legislation, and liberty: A new statement of the liberal principles of justice and political economy*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Heidegger, M. (1971). *Poetry, language, thought.* New York: Harper & Row.

von Humboldt, W. (1854). *The sphere and duties of government*. London: John Chapman.

Kuhn, T. (1970). *The structure of scientific revolutions* (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Kuhn, T. (1977). *The essential tension*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Malpas, J., & Wickham, G. (1995). Governance and failure: On the limits of Sociology. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology, 31*(3), 37–50.
Malpas, J., & Wickham, G. (1997). Governance and the world: From Joe DiMaggio to Michel Foucault. *The UTS Review, 3*(2), 91–108.
Malpas, J. (2010). Truth, politics and democracy: Arendt, Orwell and Camus. In A. Schaap, D. Celermajer, & V. Karalis (Eds.), *Power, judgment and political evil: In conversation with Hannah Arendt* (pp. 133–145). Franham: Ashgate.
Mill, J. S. (1974). *On liberty*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
Newman, J. H. (1927). *The idea of a university*. Chicago: Loyola University Press.
Ozoliņš, J. (2015). Reclaiming paedeia in an age of crises: Education and the necessity of wisdom. *Educational Philosophy and Theory, 47*(9), 870–882.
Ozoliņš, J. (2013). R. S. Peters and J. H. Newman on the aims of education. *Educational Philosophy and Theory, 45*(2), 153–170.
Perrow, C. (1999). *Normal accidents: Living with high-risk technologies*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Pink, D. (2009). *Drive: The surprising truth about what motivates us*. New York: Riverhead Books.
Plato. (1966). *Plato in twelve volumes*, *Vol. 1*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Resnik, D. B. (2009). *Playing politics with science: Balancing scientific independence and government oversight*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Sandel, M. J. (2012). *What money can't buy: The moral limits of markets*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
Schwartz, S. (2012, May). Employability skills—Where is wisdom? *The Guardian*, *Higher Education Network Blog*. https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2012/may/02/wisdom-as-an-employability-skill. Accessed Januray 12, 2018.
Schwartz, S. (2006). Values, ethics and teaching. In *Values and ethics: Managing challenges and realities in higher education*. Paris: IMHE/OECD. https://www.oecd.org/site/imhe2006bis/37477545.pdf. Accessed Januray 12, 2018.
Silver, H. (2003). *Higher education and opinion making in twentieth-century England*. London: Woburn Press.
Smith, A. (1969). *The theory of moral sentiments*. Indianapolis: Liberty Classics.
Smith, A. (1982). *The wealth of nations, books I-III*. Harmondswoth: Penguin.
Smith, A. (1999). *The wealth of nations, books IV-V*. London: Penguin Books.
Teixeira, P. N., & Dill, D. D. (2011). Introduction. In P. N. Teixeira & D. D. Dill (Eds.), *Public vices, private virtues? Assessing the effects of marketization in higher education* (pp. vii–xxiii). Dordrecht: Springer.
Tenner, E. (1996). *Why things bite back: Technology and the revenge of unintended consequences*. New York: Vintage.
Weber, M. (1947). *Theory of social and economic organization*. New York: Oxford University Press.