

The Misery of Measurement: Humanities and the Loss of Mystery

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Abstract: *Drawing for inspiration on Raymond Gaita's article "To civilise the city" published in Meanjin in 2013, this paper is a work – or a thought – in progress.¹ In particular, it bounces tangentially off Gaita's ideas to explore the idea that the decline in the prestige of the Humanities in Western societies is a result of an increasing fixation with measurement arising from the almost complete departure of mystery from everyday life. Gaita argues that academics must engage with wider society from a position of "unworldliness" if they are to contribute a "new voice" to public debate and thereby regain their relevance. Reiterating his call for universities to become havens of "difference" from the mainstream, I argue that this is not, however, possible until Western society re-embraces mystery.*

Measurement

As human beings we are fixated on measurement. At the practical level it is a mechanism that orders everyday life; at the primal level it reflects our acknowledgement of finiteness – particularly our own finiteness – and the need not to squander the time and resources at our disposal, but to use them wisely. Drawing on the cultural preferences of the societies within which they operate, universities currently allocate funding based upon how useful any particular discipline is perceived to be to that society because that is the rationale underlying Western societies' decisions regarding the funding of universities themselves, through government tax distributions and private sector philanthropy. Problems arise when what we are measuring cannot immediately be reduced to numbers but relies instead upon subjective appraisal. In such cases, the fixation with quantitative measurement requires a methodology to be developed and accepted that does reduce the problem to numbers, for then we can feel in control of our resource allocation once again. This we call qualitative measurement. It

¹ Raymond Gaita, "To civilise the city," *Meanjin* 2 (2013), <http://meanjin.com.au/articles/post/to-civilise-the-city/> (accessed 11 March 2014).

has become the backbone of the assessment strategies of the education system and is never more developed than in the disciplines of the Humanities.

Thus, when preparing their budgets, universities devise the necessary qualitative measures based on the qualitative models developed most cogently in the Humanities. Ironically, the theoretical underpinning of qualitative measurement methodologies that were developed in the Humanities are those disciplines' very undoing. Rather than acknowledge this debt, universities across Western societies are currently measuring the value of the Humanities less favourably than other disciplines because that is what is happening in society at large. This is, however, at least partly the fault of the Humanities. Instead of shoring up arguments focused upon the intrinsic value of knowledge, they have participated in the selection of teaching and assessment methods that focus increasingly upon cost-cutting economic dictates.

Indeed, economics has been allowed to ascend in the West at the expense of intrinsic-based evaluations in multiple areas. Speaking about the lack of social services in the United States, a historical yet ongoing phenomenon which obliquely parallels the devaluation of the Humanities, Tony Judt states “[w]e need to rethink the devices we employ to assess all costs: social and economic alike.”²

² Tony Judt, "What is living and what is dead in social democracy," *The New York Review of Books* (Dec 17 2009), <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2009/dec/17/what-is-living-and-what-is-dead-in-social-democrac/?pagination=false> (accessed 11 March 2014). By way of an example, Judt suggests that “[i]t is cheaper to provide benevolent handouts to the poor than to guarantee them a full range of social services as of a right.” But, he is quick to point out, this does not factor in a social cost. Judt argues that receiving a handout is humiliating, whereas receiving a benefit that is available to all and is not subject to any investigation “to determine whether you have sunk low enough to ‘deserve’ help, is not.” Judt then asks, “what if we decided to ‘quantify’ the harm done when people are shamed by their fellow citizens before receiving the mere necessities of life?” Admitting that quantifying humiliation is difficult, Judt nevertheless states that “unless we ask such questions, how can we hope to devise answers?” He recommends “a moral critique of the inadequacies of the unrestricted market or the feckless state – we need to understand *why* they offend our sense of justice or equity. We need, in short, to return to the kingdom of ends”. As a society, to even be capable of returning to the “Kingdom of ends” we would need to know that this was a philosophical idea developed in the later eighteenth century by Immanuel Kant comprising the notion of a community of rational beings capable of moral deliberation. To this end we would need to have funded Philosophy and History departments – Philosophy to develop Kant’s thought in the context of the present day, and History for

For philosopher Raimond Gaita, “an impatient hard-headedness about accountability” undermines our propensity for “meditative critical reflexivness”.³ Laying the rapid development of this phenomenon at the doorsteps of the Academy’s present-day willingness to engage with business and the military – a position inconceivable in the 1960s when “Academics were chronically suspicious” of such involvement – Gaita also suggests that it is the popular culture of the moderately wealthy city inhabitants who exude a “glamorous urbanity” that prevents the Academy – the Humanities – from holding the same place of respect within society today as they enjoyed in medieval times.

Regaining respect

Not one to state a problem without offering a solution, Gaita advocates for academics to enter into the public domain in order to regain such respect, stating “when academics enter the public domain, engaging with an educated, well-read, hard-thinking public, they do it best when they go beyond their capacity to give expert advice. They do it best as citizens in critical conversation with other citizens.”⁴ Further, in engaging with the public, academics should embrace their perceived – and often real – closeted unworldliness, because their very difference brings a new voice to the conversation of the otherwise mainstream participants.

In order to do this, however, the institutions which have trained the academics must also be fundamentally separate from and different to the society which funds them. For Gaita, the unworldly academic working in an intentionally separatist University is essential to the health of humanity. He says:

its inherent advocacy of the need to retain the records of the past as a resource for of all scholars, past and present, in the pursuit of a good life today.

³ Gaita, "To civilise the city".

⁴ Ibid.

When a university provides students with a space that protects them from the pressures of the world—from worldliness...—and from the pressures that conspire to make them children of their times, then it fulfils its primary public obligation, compared to which any obligation that academics may have to engage with the broader culture outside the university or with politics is secondary. It is a space in which they are invited to form new desires and ideals in the light of values that they had probably not dreamed of and certainly had never before fully understood. The unworldly connotations of the expression “a community of scholars” should not be a source of embarrassment.⁵

Further, Gaita continues:

If I have succeeded in making that plausible, then I will also have made plausible the argument that we must preserve the unworldly space in which university teachers are able to reveal to their students what it means, mostly deeply, to devote one’s life to an academic vocation. They will then reveal to their students, who will go into the world to live many kinds of lives, a value in their education that nourishes them more deeply than the kind of liberal education that many people praise.⁶

Avoiding Managerial Newspeak

At no time does Gaita discuss measurement except to dismiss it as “Managerial newspeak”, insisting that “instrumentalist conceptions of the value of the university” must be resisted:

Students who learn to speak it, confident in no other language with which to express what it can mean to be a student, will not have the words with which to

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

identify the deepest values of their education and thereby to claim its treasures as their inheritance.⁷

Indeed, the intrusion of business with its incumbent models of morality and value into universities over the past several decades was accompanied by well-conceived but poorly implemented policies of tertiary education expansion. Rather than proceeding immediately into the workforce after secondary school, a far greater proportion of students are entering universities. The Universities have had to cater to an influx of students with, on average, a lesser intellectual capacity. Courses have changed to accommodate this, measures have been adjusted and, necessarily, the mean quality of graduates has reduced. This is not inherently bad; on the contrary, access to the higher level of intellectual thought of a university course to a wider range of people can only be an investment into any society's future. Nevertheless, it comes at a cost over and above the increased financial burden it places on taxpayers. One of those costs is the pressure on institutions to provide mass education at a lower-per-head cost than was previously the case. The methods of achieving this are well rehearsed in the corridors of Humanities' departments and include employing postgraduate students to teach in the place of lecturers and professors without providing or requiring any pedagogical training. Other strategies include allocating administrative tasks to academics who are trained in enquiry, not administration, and encouraging the delivery of mass lectures and online courses that do little to engage the passion of students, despite the best efforts of all involved in the design and delivery of the course. In the latter case, the negative consequences are compounded when the designer's best efforts have been compromised by a lack of resources available to them, primarily time.

The mean quality of the graduate has been eroded, yet the easily quantifiable measure – the number of course completions – has not. It has increased. When all universities in a society participate in this erosion of educational quality, as they all must to survive in a highly

⁷ *Ibid.*

competitive economics-driven system of government funding, the cost to society – a reduction in the quality of the education for all, including the brightest students – is hidden.

Imagination

Yet beyond issues arising from expansion, underlying Gaita's recommendations is the intuition that some crucial factor is being missed. I venture that this crucial factor is imagination. Pile enough constraints on any human and they begin to act by rote; the urge for imaginative solutions is dampened. Reduce the weight of imagination from the equation of human experience and it becomes self-perpetuating. Eventually, if it is not honed through practice, the tool of imagination becomes dull, blunt, useless, and humanity becomes light-weight. Yet that is exactly the path Western societies are taking with their urge to measure everything. When secondary students choose their final year subjects based not on what they are interested in but upon a smart-phone application that tells them which combination of subjects and estimated marks will gain them the highest final score, society demonstrates that they have lost something important – the ability to value knowledge for its beauty; its intrinsic worth.

When unfettered, imagination combines with knowledge to create new ideas that cannot arise purely from methodical and systematic approaches, because in such approaches there is no acknowledgement of the spark that imagination ignites. When measurement is the focus, "finiteness" becomes the goal and the reality of infinity is effectively dismissed by *a priori* measurement systems that have simply factored it into an equation based on the rules of probability and chance. And yet infinity is the spur of imagination. Creation is spawned in the idea that what exists is without beginning or end – that anything is possible. Measurement lies in the realm which focuses not on the possible but the actual. It is pragmatic, careful, measured. Yet to devise a clever measurement system, creativity – the result of applied imagination – is a useful tool. When creativity works with measurement – when a creative solution is submitted to a measurement of its likely worth, a better outcome is made

possible. In the West creativity continues to thrive. Nevertheless, in the wake of the development of economic ideologies within the governance of our societies – whether of Marxist or Capitalistic persuasion – measurement has been in the ascendancy, and with every step further along the measurement path, the laces of the straightjacket of finity are tightened just a little more around the free spirit of imagination. We trade the certainty of measurement for the uncertainty of creativity because it is the safer option.

Returning to Risk

As Tony Judt notes, today the West's experience of financial insecurity emanating from the global financial crisis is engendering a desire for safe economic options.⁸ Similarly, with media reporting every natural disaster and laying out every act of human evil, and with the rapid dissemination of graphic images of these tragedies afforded by internet and satellite technologies, a climate of chronic insecurity is developing. In the past our lives were influenced by the disasters of our circle of friends and acquaintances; today we must cope with the knowledge of the disasters of far distant strangers, from cyclones in the Philippines, to famines in South Sudan, to planes disappearing over the South China Sea. Our psyches are unavoidably affected by this knowledge causing the desire for safe options to permeate all areas of life. The media feeds us with story after story of tragedy and so we begin to feel less and less safe; less and less inclined to do anything risky.

In order to contemplate an increasingly risk-resistant society in the context of the decline of the Humanities, I now plan to fly in the face of such societal norms and engage in a risky undertaking. Straying, albeit very briefly (as I too am a product of this risk-averse society), into an area that for many decades has been forbidden from discourse in the Marxist-dominated Academy and is only beginning to become more readily accepted again, I am

⁸ Judt, "What is living and what is dead in social democracy".

going to mention religion and God in order to contemplate mystery, and to argue for the benefit to humanity of accepting the concept of the borderless joy of infinite unknowingness.

Whereas in the past, some solace or relief might have been gained from learning of tragedy by praying to God, today the majority of the Western world does not have access to such solace because they do not practice religion in any structured way.⁹ The loss of religion means that humans must find other ways of coping. The field of psychiatry – a mere century old – is one path. Another, available to increasing numbers since the industrial revolution, is to escape through material acquisition. Yet the accumulation of knowledge of bad events is only temporarily assuaged by the accumulation of things. If intuition is the snap decision based on all knowledge fed into the brain across time, weighted by the number of times it is recalled – which I believe it is – then the enormity of all disasters, large and small, close and far, forms the backdrop of all decision making. Certainly, the accumulation of bad events and experiences is offset by the accumulation of good events and experiences. But in a swipe-card, security-guard, media-driven world that prefers to portray the dramatic bad more than the everyday good, our brains become unbalanced. We become less secure because our expectation of bad is heightened beyond what is truly the case. We take the safer options. We say “no” because it is easier than taking the chance of saying “yes”. “No” requires no action. “Yes” requires ongoing action, ongoing commitment, and ongoing risk of pain. The more we say “no” the less we are required to use our creativity to find solutions, the less we engage our imagination the less we acknowledge infinity and the less we acknowledge the mystery that infinity encapsulates.

⁹ Although sociologists are divided regarding the extent to which the West is secularised, and the USA is generally considered more overtly religious than other Western societies, data from surveys and other sources compiled in Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*, ed. David C. Leege and Kenneth D. Wald, Cambridge Studies in Social Theory, Religion and Politics (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), compellingly supports the argument that religious participation has declined in Western societies. Often the debate confuses world-wide participation in religious practice with the participation rates and practices of Westerners.

Recalling Infinity

We have dismissed the knowledge that some things are beyond human conception with the often un-thought, but ever-present idea, that eventually, through science, we will know all. Perhaps this is true, but it seems unlikely without a credible explanation of infinity. It is all very well to understand the infinite as an abstract concept, but do we truly think we can understand infinity itself? What happened before the Big Bang? And what happened before that, and before that? What happens when the universe dies – does something replace it? Perhaps a void? But a void has boundaries – everything has boundaries and dimensions – everything can be measured... can't it?

In actual fact we have to acknowledge that there may be things that humans will never be able to explain. To actually conceive of the possibility of unknowingness admits to its veracity. Certainly such a thought remains unthought in the minds of the many, and probably always has. But whereas in the past it was largely unthought in the West because the explanation for mysteries was encapsulated in a belief in the Christian God, and so pondering was left to those with a bent for philosophy or theology, today the concept of unknowingness is almost completely irrelevant to an everyday life that is, for the most part, about accumulating wealth and allocating it according to our needs and – for the more fortunate – whims. As a society we are largely self-sufficient: the notion of God has left the equation of Western life because God is irrelevant. Nevertheless, it is not the loss of God that is important; it is the loss of the idea of mystery for which God was the traditional answer. And that bears its own sense of wonder. How did we lose the uncanny joy of mystery? For that is what has happened. We have lost the ability to accept mystery and in losing the ability to accept that not all things can be known, we have traded mystery for the soulless misery of measurement. If all things can be known, then the battle for knowledge can be won purely through the methodical chasing up of answers to each set of questions that arise from the trenches of practice, then measuring them against that which has previously been established. The uncertainty of creativity becomes increasingly less

favoured as we look to those areas where we can improve the material lives of humanity and forget to nourish our minds and souls – minds and souls that enable deep thought to couple with imagination; a coupling that, for example, enabled us to imagine we could send a camera-armed rover to Mars; a coupling that made it possible for just such a rover to be designed, built, and sent to Mars. Certainly, much of this can be credited to science, to numbers, to measurement – yet without the Humanities it could well have been simply called Mars Rover 1. But it wasn't. It was called Spirit, a name which points to the wonder within humankind that the atheist banks his or her faithless faith upon; to the part of humans that enables them to attain the impossible; the part of being human that a religious person calls the soul.

Occupations of the Soul

So here we see an example that represents a window of hope. As people become disillusioned by the perpetual choice machine of market economies, and discover that satisfying material desires is not ultimately all that satisfying; and as awareness of bad happenings is exploited more and more explicitly by members of the media trained to be sensationalist ghouls, the occupations of the soul – whether they take the form of theology, art or philosophical contemplation – are making a comeback. And it is the fledgling rejuvenation of the need to accept the occupations of the soul that must inspire us as scholars and teachers to listen to Raymond Gaita's exhortations. If the chronic devaluation of the Humanities by Western societies is to be turned around, those of us teaching and producing research within the Humanities must engage our students and the larger community with an enthusiasm that matches the thirst for knowledge that compels us to grapple with the unknown, and sometimes – even in this chronically pragmatic, chronically material world – the unknowable. To tend and feed these communities with a full passion for knowledge will restimulate the love of learning; a virus that existed unfettered prior to the Enlightenment and the concomitant demystifying, inoculating advance of secularisation, and see it thriving again throughout the West.

Certainly, this requires those in the Humanities, often deflated by the enormity of the task already at hand, to rise above the weariness the system engenders; to recall the passion they felt as undergraduates; to forgive and forget the mediocrity of the educational processes that they have experienced. Rather than say “it was bad for me, just get over it” to students already on the chasm of disillusion, they must envision a better system and work towards bringing it into fruition, regardless of how futile and ultimately unsuccessful they may deem such an effort to be. We all know that passion and enthusiasm spurs us on. As Gaita reminds us, if we can engender passion and enthusiasm in our students then they go out into the “real world” knowing the joy of it, and understanding from personal experience why the Humanities must be allowed to continue. I want to be in the stairway of my institution hearing more students say what I overheard yesterday: that the buzz of completing a substantial piece of assessment is the greatest stimulant of her or his life.

The Humanities feed the soul; they remind us of mystery; they fill the existential void that material culture cannot fill or explain. The Humanities make it possible to treasure the pursuit of answers to unanswerable questions, to pour thought into the void between knowledge and infinity and, in finding surprising answers, to bring us closer to knowing things we never really thought we could know.

The extent to which the Humanities contributes to the betterment of human wellbeing need not be measured; in an act of faith we simply need to acknowledge that those who wish to engage in deep thought without any specific material gain should be encouraged to do so. For, once all of the material problems of the world are solved, what is left is the non-material – the pursuit of ideas. This is not to imply that the humanities can be left untended until all of the material problems of the world are solved, because the Humanities contributes to the solving of material problems by providing critical qualitative feedback on the effect of material solutions on humankind’s wellbeing. But here I stray: the Humanities’ instrumental

value is not the topic of this piece of writing; quite the opposite. I posit a need for humans to believe that measured instrumentality is not the only way by which the abstract activities of the mind should be considered. Participating through thought in the sheer wonder of the created world, both material and immaterial, should be accepted as a desirable end in and of itself.

Certainly, the joy felt by the thinker who thinks something entirely new could well be infectious as his or her joy at the discovery is passed on to colleagues, family, acquaintances and friends, thereby improving the world in an instrumental way by improving their emotional well-being. But such a closed interpretative framework does not make room for the mystery of life and is the poorer for it. Mystery, in its naivety and in its infinity, is the ultimate provocateur; the catalyst, when all answers seem to be found, that says “actually, there is more – put your minds to this conundrum”. Mystery is priceless. Mystery is immeasurable. Mystery gives meaning to life; through mystery the ennui of finite knowledge that leaves no challenge to humanity – no reason for existence other than the hedonistic pursuit of pleasure – is avoided. Because when all answers are found, the world will be perfect, and life will be perfect – but we will not know this because, if born into perfection we have no measure by which to evaluate our lives – no opposition, no tension, no traction. In a world governed by measurement we will not know that we are happy because there is no “unhappy” by which to compare it. In a scientific world, a world where answers to every problem are conceptually possible, cosmic lethargy is the ultimate outcome. In a mysterious world there will always be something that fully engages our most valuable assets – our minds, our hearts, our souls. In a mysterious world the joy of discovery is forever possible – for mystery lies just out of our grasp, beyond infinity.

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