

# Historical and systematic considerations relevant to an assessment of the position of the university within a differentiated society

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## **Synopsis**

In spite of all the significant changes recorded in the history of the university the mere possibility to speak about universities in all these (varying) circumstances pre-supposes the constant appeal of its underlying normative structural principle, which surely could be realized in a better or worse way. Only seriously observing this structural principle can safe-guard us from surrendering to an abolition of the internal sphere-sovereignty of the university as a societal institution by delivering it to a-typical societal goals. The ideological one-sidedness of positivism should not be replaced by a plea for societal relevance which transforms the university into a mere extension of some or other non-academic societal institution.

## **1. Ideological underpinnings**

Modern highly differentiated industrial societies are all co-dependent upon the role of universities as academic institutions. Even during the initial genesis of modern Western universities during the late medieval period and the early modern era faculties such as those of divinity, law and medicine intended to provide society with pastors, lawyers and doctors. During the past five hundred years the scholarly scope of the academic enterprise broadened its reach to such an extent that there is almost no single domain within society which does not have intimate links with important competencies and skills that could be acquired through pursuing some or other course obtainable from university studies.

Soon after the rise of universities by the end of the 12th century it became clear that modern society will have to reckon with three future powers: the church, the king and the academic podium (*sacerdotium, imperium, studium*) (cf. Rashdall, 1936:2, 573; Romein, 1947:2 and Stellingwerf,

1971:136). At this stage the all-encompassing grip of the church started to fade, particularly through developments occurring during the early 14th century. Late scholastic nominalism challenged the authority of the pope and the church and the Renaissance opened up new vistas, exploring the possibilities of intellectual pursuits as an infinite task – thus continuing views advanced by thinkers such as Nicholas of Cusa, Giordano Bruno and eventually Galileo, Descartes and Newton.

Up to this point Western culture was constantly struggling with ideological distortions. Initially, in Greek culture, the emphasis on the state as all-encompassing form of life capable of providing for all the human needs, emerged as a totalitarian institution. Both Plato and Aristotle adhered to such a totalitarian conception. They sacrificed all non-political dimensions of society to the concerns of the body politic – whether viewed as fitted in a strict “estate-order” (Plato), or whether society as a whole is dissolved in the Greek *polis* as highest totality. The state is considered to be the *perfect* community. In it human beings can find whatever they need for their full existence. As a “political animal” the human being has an inherent natural drive towards the formation of the state (cf. Aristotle, *Politica*, 1253).

Both Augustine and Thomas Aquinas continued this totalitarian conception, merely substituting the state with the church. If an ideology is defined as the attempt to elevate one specific societal tie to become the all-inclusive one within human society, then both the ancient view of the *state* and the medieval conception of the *church* are exemplifying an ideological stance. Given the overarching position of the church during the high Middle Ages it is understandable that both the state and the university seriously wanted to liberate themselves from church domination.

However, the question is whether they effectively succeeded in freeing themselves from the church and whether it signified the emergence of a situation in which both the state and the university were liberated from ideological distortions.

## **2. University and society**

Topitsch (1969:23-24) points out that liberalism managed to liberate cultural life from control by the church and the state to such an extent that the freedom of scientific research and theorising were acknowledged in the constitutions of many modern states. However, as Topitsch continues to argue (1969:24), the “ideology” of (neo-)liberalism had to struggle against the spiritual climate in which traditional ideologies maintained themselves – dating back to Medieval and Greek influences.

This remark also applies to the classical dilemma entailed in an understanding of human society and the state, namely that between an individualistic (atomistic) and holistic (universalistic) view (cf. Strauss, 1999).

### 3. The dialectics entailed in the understanding of the state

Whereas traditional (ancient and medieval) views of the state were largely *holistic* in nature, emphasizing that the state is the larger whole embracing the rest of society in its totality, early modern conceptions of the state reverted to an abstract atomistic approach which soon, in the social contract theories, constructed the state from its supposed last elements (atoms), the *individuals*.

It was only during the romantic era (late 18th and early 19th century) that modern humanism made the switch from a rationalistic individualism (atomism) to an irrationalistic holism (universalism). These two ideological extremes hampered a sound understanding of the nature of the state even throughout the 20th century. National socialism and Fascism continued the universalistic (holistic) legacy with its known disastrous consequences evidenced in the second World War, while the alternative account of democracies (constitutional states under the rule of law) are largely inspired by the spirit of *individualism*.

People in the West are generally convinced that the “liberal-democratic” state or even the “social-democratic” state transcends the impasse of totalitarianism. Yet, the unjustified atomistic starting-point from which our modern understanding of the democratic state emerged (partially Rousseau, Kant and others) is potentially just as totalitarian as any universalistic theory. The ultimate dilemma of an atomistic view of the state is given in the implication that law becomes an expression of the will of the people (citizens) which can only manifest itself within the state – thus leaving no room for the internal freedom of any social collectivity *distinct* from the state. If the mature conception of Rousseau is followed, the will of the people (the sum of individual wills) is transformed into a genuine whole which embraces every individual as a dependent part of it (the *general will*).

Symptomatic and illustrative of the problems entailed in this legacy is the position taken by Dicey in his well-known work “Law of the Constitution” (1927). In discussing the “Unlimited legislative authority of Parliament” (1927:39 ff.) Dicey emphatically states: “The point to be now noted is that such enactments being as it were the legislation of illegality are the highest exertion and crowning proof of sovereign power” (1927: 48). Although Dicey was not acquainted with the principle of “sphere-

sovereignty” operative in the line of Althusius, Van Prinsterer, Kuyper and Dooyeweerd, his view of sovereignty explicitly opposes the idea of *limited sovereignty*. He writes:

“ ‘Limited Sovereignty,’ in short, is in the case of a Parliamentary as of every other sovereign, a contradiction in terms” (1927:66, note 3 continuing from the previous page).

#### **4. The “liberated” university**

During and after the early modern era and particularly after the rise of positivism as a philosophical orientation dictating the appreciation of “science” (restricted to physics as model of science), modern universities claimed to have moved ahead by taking a second liberating step. Whereas the state had to free itself from dominance by the church, science and the university had to get rid of intervention executed by both the church and the state.

In South Africa this development gave birth to the so-called “conscience clause” (introduced by Jan Smuts in the beginning of the 20th century) which entailed the prohibition for any university to discriminate against students or teaching staff on the basis of their religious convictions. Those universities who accepted this clause were caught in the ideology of a “neutral” and “objective” science. By and large this ideology dominated the first half of the 20th century. As such it confused religious beliefs within the context of ecclesiastical communities with scholarly (scientific) convictions which are inherent to the scientific enterprise. However, an insight into the nature of the latter had to wait for the extensive developments within the new philosophy of science worked out during the second half of the 20th century. The most important insights of this new philosophy of science were anticipated by Dooyeweerd during the three decades preceding 1950. Positivism was severely challenged by Popper and also by the Frankfurt school of neo-Marxism. The slogan of “objective” and “neutral” science had to face the revolting students of the late sixties of the previous century. They claimed that Western societies actually surrendered to ideological distortions with an appeal to “objective (neutral) science.”

Suddenly the mere appeal to “academic freedom” did not any more appear to be convincing at all. The solemn academic, exercising his or her personal (individual) academic freedom, increasingly had to face the claims to accountability. Already during the seventies specific scientists and disciplines commenced with giving an account with regard to their “relevance” for “society” at large. The ivory tower of the isolated academic was broken down and institutions for higher learning had to “posi-

tion” themselves within society in terms of what now, i.e. during the eighties of the previous century, emerged as the necessity of formulating a vision and mission.

## 5. The “responsible” university

In stead of being *liberated* from society the contemporary university now had to face the issue of accountability. This process was already anticipated during the seventies. Before he entered politics the former Rector of the “Randse Afrikaanse Universiteit,” Prof Gerrit Viljoen, during the mid-seventies addressed a meeting on the Campus of the (then) University of the Orange Free State. As one of the first in South Africa he defended the “third” function of the university, adjacent to teaching and research, namely *community service*.

The outcome of this process was that the *collective accountability* (vision and mission formulation) and *additional community service* became an integral part of university life – not only in South Africa but also abroad.

What was not realized quite well is that the need to formulate a mission and mission actually emerged from the theory of *instrumental organizations* (cf. Luhman, 1973:55 ff.). This theory, which is intimately linked to modern *systems theory*, interchanges the possible *aims* of a social collectivity and its *inner nature*. As a consequence it is no longer capable of distinguishing between *typical* and *a-typical* aims. Only when the structural “typicity,” the unique nature of an institution, is accounted for, will it be possible to come to a meaningful distinction of what typically belongs to the task of that institution and what does not belong to it.

If the university is an *academic* institution to begin with, this very basic character should play a guiding role in all its activities. Stellingwerf remarks that the oldest idea of the university is that of an *universitas magistrorum et scholarium*, i.e. a community of teachers and students (1971:35). This led to the insight that the various disciplines are not disconnected but should be appreciated within a perspective on the unbreakable *coherence* which prevails between them (the idea of an “*universitas scientiarum*”). Only after the Enlightenment, particularly in Germany, the importance of combining teaching with research was brought into practice. In England training and the education of a responsible “gentleman” impregnated the university with a distinctive twist (cf. Stellingwerf, 1971:36-37).

It is important to clarify the *academic* character of the university *before* any attention is given to possible “aims” or “goals” universities may pursue. Of course any social collectivity can also pursue *goals* or *aims* which

are not typically belonging to its basic nature. In South Africa the state got involved in many a-typical endeavours, such as erecting a railways, a steel industry (Isacor) and a Post Office. The mere fact that South Africa witnessed – before and after 1994 – steps towards privatization, testifies to the fact that the state is indeed involved in activities which do not belong to its proper nature, for the simple reason that the state as a *public* legal institution itself cannot be privatized!

It is quite possible to have a state which is not involved in any of these diverse kinds of activities. But a state which is not involved in the *harmonization* of the *legal interests* on its territory – on the basis of the “power of the sword” – is no longer a state in the proper sense of the term.

Of course this does not mean that it may not be justified to be involved in such tasks (cf. H J Strauss, 1965). The guiding perspective should always be that whatever is undertaken should not lead to a greater measure of dependence upon the state but rather should enhance an increasing sense of responsibility and independence within non-political domains of society. For otherwise the a-typical tasks of the state may lead to a *de-differentiation* of society and an eventual return to an undifferentiated totalitarian societal condition.

Similarly, also a university may undertake a-typical tasks, brought together under the flag of “community service.” But once again these tasks should be recognized for what they are: *a-typical*. This qualification simply means that there may be (and **are**) universities which restrict themselves to their typical (and therefore: *primary*) “service” to society, namely to render high quality teaching and research *without ceasing to be universities!* At the beginning of the new millennium there are ample reasons for South African universities to be involved in (a-typical) “community service.” But the aim should always be to help various sectors within society to grow and mature up to a point where they can function on their own. This should be the *Leitmotif* of all “community service” of universities – observing the principle of general cultural civilizational development.

The same applies to the “entrepreneurial” activities of universities. They are all geared towards the ideal of making the university financially independent – such that the typical task of the university as an academic institution may flourish. If this a-typical side of modern universities is mistakenly understood to be a typifying characteristic it would be impossible to tell the difference between the university and a firm.

If it is true that an institution such as a university cannot be divorced from its social and economic environment the question remains why it cannot be identified with it either.

## 6. University or multiversity

The history of Western universities may discern a line of development commencing with the Greek *episteme* and Latin *scientia* and culminating in the English *science* and German *Wissenschaft*. We have already noted that the science-ideal and positivism accounts for the predominantly natural scientific contents assigned to the term “science” within English speaking countries, South Africa not excluded. Yet, it is preferable to continue the German tradition which took “Wissenschaft” to encompass all academic disciplines, including the humanities (even law, theology and aesthetics).

Many competent scholars point out that the initial *unity* of knowledge and science (*Wissenschaft*), constitutive for a *uni*-versity, eventually disintegrated to such an extent that there were no longer any visible signs left of an integrated perspective. The (philosophical) claim of positivism, namely that the disciplines operate without any philosophical pre-suppositions whatsoever contributed substantially to the emerging reality of a *multi*-versity. The well-known defence of the “value-free” nature of the academic enterprise advanced by Max Weber did not challenge the positivistic emphasis on “factuality.” In respect of the positivistic pre-occupation with “facts” Topitsch argues that this “Tatsachenfetischismus” serves to justify the existing social relationships (1969:45).

It should be kept in mind that initially various faculties maintained what is known as a *studium generale* in which a unifying perspective amidst the diversity of scholarly disciplines prevailed. The nature of this *studium generale* did not oppose a differentiation of disciplines (such as that between the *trivium* and *quadrivium*). In fact, the initial crucial impulse was not even directed towards *training* for specific *occupations*. Rather, the central concern was scholarly reflection *itself* (cf. Grundmann, 1960: 39 ff. 63 ff.).

It must therefore be seen as a serious loss that our modern and contemporary universities succumbed to the practice of a *multiversity* in spite of the unity which is still present in their organizational structures and which is brought to expression in their vision and mission formulations. What is notably *absent* in most vision and mission statements is a constructive and integrating ideal of the unity of all disciplines, guided by a particular life- and world-view.

In practical terms this more recent disintegrating legacy left universities open to the threat of specialised “idiotism.” A victim of this ailment, in popular parlance, is a person who “knows more and more about less and less, until that person knows everything about nothing.” Already in the thirties of the previous century Ortega Y. Gasset signaled this negative tendency.

Ironically enough this disintegrating effect of the philosophy of positivism found a counter-force in the newly emerging philosophy of science which once again emphasizes the necessity and inevitability of a directing *paradigm*. Hand-in-hand with this development neo-Marxism advanced a radicalization of the Biblical account of *sin* by proclaiming that even every *new order* is corrupt by definition – in the words of Bloch: “what is cannot be true.”

The underlying historicistic orientation and hermeneutic inclination of the contemporary “Zeitgeist” enhance the idea that the ongoing changes which the university experienced in its historical development precludes the idea of a *constant underlying structural principle*. Rossouw points out that in spite of all the differences entailed in the idea of the university one nonetheless can identify elements of continuity as well: “A diversity of paradigmatic views regarding the nature and function of the university developed in different eras and cultural environments. This diversity of paradigmatic views, or sets of pre-suppositions and convictions, do represent competing but nonetheless not totally irreconcilable manifestations of the idea of the university” (Rossouw, 1993:31). To this he adds the remark that these manifestations constitute “in reality a continuous conceptual tradition in which already established meanings repeatedly at once are conserved and transformed, in which they at the same time transcended and maintained a relative validity” (1993:31). Although one can support this recognition of both constancy and change, the absence of acknowledging not merely a *conception* or *idea* of the university but indeed a *normative structural principle* lying at the foundation of variable historical manifestations, does highlight an alternative orientation – one that is clearly sceptical about *ontic normativity*.

Yet the reality of *ontic normativity* surely surfaces in all the well-known normative contraries present in various aspects of human conduct, such as logical – illogical, historical – un-historical, polite – impolite, frugal – wasteful, beautiful – ugly, legal – illegal, and so on. To be sure, no single academic discipline can function outside the matrix of *logical normativity*, implicitly or explicitly observing the appeal of logical standards such as the logical principle of identity, (non-)contradiction, sufficient reason,

Occam's razor (thought-economy), and so on. The recognition of the *historical context* of scholarly thinking combined with the necessity always to *interpret* data nevertheless do not eliminate the underlying relevance of (universal) logical principles, but *presuppose* them.

Moreover, although scientific thinking in all its manifestations operate under the guidance of (deepened) logical thinking, a university is much more than merely its function within the logical-analytical aspect of reality.

## 7. The multi-faceted nature of the university

In order to illustrate the multi-faceted nature of the university we briefly look at some prominent examples.

As an alternative to an atomistic or holistic understanding of societal reality already Groen van Prinsterer and Abraham Kuyper advanced the idea of sphere-sovereignty in order to account for the uniqueness and distinctness of the various spheres of competence of diverse societal collectivities. In his famous oration at the opening of the Free University of Amsterdam (on: *Sphere-Sovereignty* / “Souvereiniteit in eigen Kring” – 1880) Kuyper made a plea for the internal autonomy of the university, its sphere-sovereignty. He did that with an explicit argument against its subordination to either the state or the church. A “free university” should be capable of pursuing its own academic goals without the interference of the state or any church.

Yet this does not mean that the university itself should become a *substitute* for any other societal collectivity. Particularly the modernist faith in the rationality of the human intellect explains the apostate tendency to *deify* scholarly activities, which then easily leads to an identification of the university with the church. We only have to recall the title of a well-known work written by Hazel Barnes: *The University as the New Church* (1970).

Rather, the pursuit of scholarly activities is itself dependent upon a supra-theoretical commitment which transcends each and everyone of the differentiated societal ties a person may have. Consequently, no single societal collectivity can provide a steady and firm shelter for the deeply rooted urge towards the true or pretended origin of whatever there is.

The characteristic theoretical-analytical function of scholarly activities within the university displays both an inner and an external coherence with other facets of reality.

Think for a moment about the nature of the *credo* of an academic institution (the formulation of its vision and mission). One can compare it to the *confession* of a *community of faith* for in both cases we encounter the way in which a university and a church function within the certitudinal aspect of reality. But as little as one can identify a political party with a church merely on the basis of its political convictions (*credo*) is it possible to identify a university and a church merely because they both have a function within the faith-aspect of reality. Distinct from this external coherence between the logically qualified university and the faith aspect one can also discern an *inner connection* between these two aspects, manifested in the logical trust and certainty guiding scientific thinking in various contexts – many times merely as an ideal.

Similarly we have to distinguish between an internal and external coherence between the logical and the historical aspect: the former is observed in the logical mastery or control over a given knowledge-material (internal anticipating coherence) while the latter is seen in the concrete function of the university in the historical aspect (its history). The mentioned logical principle of thought-economy (Occam's razor – displaying the inner connection between the logical and the economic aspects of reality) ought to be distinguished from the original function of the university within the economic aspect (the external coherence – think about the budget).

## 8. University, state and law

During the late-Medieval period the emerging universities manifested their “sphere-sovereignty” in an extremely independent way, simply because in these institutions lecturers and pupils did not have any assets. It was strong because it was not bound to any *place* or *possessions* (Stellingwerf, 1971:143). Soon this phase belonged to the past. Buildings, capital and libraries turned out to be cultural objects essential for a *structured* functioning of the university. Already before 1500 the Pope in Italy turned 64 of the 70 existing universities into internationally acknowledged institutions. This led to a restriction of universities to the *national* domain, but the most important element was that whereas three faculties served specific occupations, liberal arts were supposed to be organized in a basic faculty responsible for the general development of the student. This general development within the faculty of the humanities had a “*propaedeutic*” function with respect to the other three faculties (cf. Stellingwerf, 1971: 145).

Even in those cases where the government of a country does make a contribution to the functioning and continued existence of universities this

does not mean that the state can prescribe to a university what its scientific orientation ought to be. At most the state can apply a general *formal* yardstick, stipulating the minimal formal requirements for an acceptable university. The *directional choice* of a university – manifested in its statement of vision and mission – in principle lies beyond the grasp of governmental interference. If the state transgresses in this regard it has irrevocably set its foot on the path of a totalitarian and absolutistic practice, disregarding the original sphere-sovereignty not only of the university, but in principle of all non-political societal collectivities.

The mere fact the government of a constitutional state under the rule of law (a so-called *democratic* state or *just* state) has to integrate and harmonize a multiplicity of legal interests on its territory does not entail that these legal interests emerge from the state or are created by the state. Much rather, for the state to *be* a state a differentiated society is pre-supposed within which there are original spheres of competence not reducible to state-law. For this reason a university once erected has the right to determine its own character (its directional choice) – a right not granted by the state but merely *acknowledged* (and to be *respected*) by it.

In spite of the fact that both the state and the university function within the legal aspect of reality they still maintain their respective *juridical sphere-sovereignty*.

## 9. Conclusion

Notwithstanding all the significant changes recorded in the history of the university the mere possibility to speak about universities in all these (varying) circumstances pre-supposes the constant appeal of its underlying normative structural principle, which surely could be realized in a better or worse way. Only seriously observing this structural principle can safe-guard us from surrendering to an abolition of the internal sphere-sovereignty of the university as a societal institution by delivering it to a-typical societal goals. The ideological one-sidedness of positivism should not be replaced by a plea for societal relevance which transforms the university into a mere extension of some or other non-academic societal institution.

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