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Governing Professors, Non-linearity and the Elusive Gift of Immortality

Chapter 9 in Responsibility and its Avoidance.

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9. Governing Professors, Non-linearity and the Elusive Gift of Immortality

The elusive gift that is referred to here is academic immortality. We know the names; Darwin, Einstein, others, but don't often ask ourselves questions about the conditions that might encourage or allow the emergence of creative thought, even if of a more modest kind. Universities should surely aim to provide appropriate environments. But university governance in UK turns out to be a tortuous process whereby most VCs respond to the obsessions of recent UK governments and impose industrial style ¹ performance management regimes. Academic staff struggle to meet the measures. Creativity, I suggest, can become a casualty. The question is; why this strategy? The answer is quite obvious really but, close up, one may not see the wood for the trees.

The question that I want to address here is both practical and academic. The question is this. Why is it that universities in Britain have chosen performance management techniques that are more suited to mass production processes in industry than to the advancement of knowledge? It is clear that academics in universities do need to perform and that an individual's contribution to overall performance and reputation is important. Information about performance is therefore a serious issue. Some system is necessary; but what?

I had been contemplating this issue for some years before I was invited to become a visiting scholar in a Japanese university for a three-month spell. Colleagues there were curious as to how universities in UK or departments within them are managed and whether there were things that they could learn. I have to confess that my reaction was 'No, please No'. I could see however that they may have felt that they had problems. In many ways my host university had what one could term old fashioned industrial style management rather than new; academics having to clock in and out every day and fit whatever thought processes were going on in their minds into prescribed categories in their time-sheets, but actually this could be fairly readily accommodated without too much obvious subversion. New Public Management was nevertheless in the air. They thought that my erstwhile UK university might have it and they wanted to know. So I was obliged to put pen to paper, though I doubted that they would appreciate my anxieties.

¹ Article in New York Review of Books

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2011/jan/13/grim-threat-british-universities/>



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These things were mulling over in my mind when I found myself in an art gallery. The Nagoya/Boston Museum of Fine Arts had an exhibition called 'The Brilliance of Bird-and-Flower Painting: Gems of East Asian Art'. It was there that I encountered – in picture No. 18 – 'The Daoist Immortal Magu with Crane and Flower Basket' and experienced my own little bit of enlightenment. This is what I wrote home.

Inside, when I had mastered the umbrella rack technology, I came across this exhibition. I was handed an English blurb but I suspect the Japanese version was more helpful and that Japanese visitors probably carried more in their heads and heritage.² But the pictures did speak for themselves and were very lovely. In No. 15, Mandarin Ducks under Peach Blossom [China, 13thC] for instance, Him and Her duck do seem to be speaking to each other harmoniously [an unmentioned Chaffinch looking on from said peach tree]. No.16: Two Magpies Playing in a Willow Tree, [China 17thC] has magpies clearly making noises the way that magpies should.

In Nine Herons by a Willow Tree [No. 20, China, Ming Dynasty] one can guess at 9 being auspicious somehow and in any case the birds have both mobility and elegance. And so it went on: one artful delight after another; each speaking of order and expected relationships. It was all, if not entirely intelligible, certainly Confucian: birds should behave like that, butterflies do add grace to blossoms like that, and Mynah Birds do dispute in that way. Everything was in proper proportion [and perspective, which surprised me – I had thought it a later invention].

Then around a corner I came across something rather different: The Daoist Immortal Magu with a Crane and Flower Basket [China 14th Century]. Much in this picture is of the same order as the others: there is a suitably contorted pine tree and other evidence of forest. The flower basket could be a still life. But the man, centre stage; the Immortal Magu is skipping in inelegant delight. The crane by contrast, is all disdain. It stands there, clearly having said or done what was required, its head turned away. I had to laugh. Next day I consulted a companion in the Visiting Scholar's room, Dr Li – the man studying the Winged Horse in

² The English text just translated the titles and gave as introduction: "The motifs painted have various connotations such as wishes for good luck or hidden meanings from Confucianism and Buddhism. Birds and flowers were painted to invoke longevity....and, while bird-and-flower painting styles differ in periods and areas, we still understand these motifs today". In other words: guess.



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Tibetan and Japanese mythology. He seemed to be the right person. The traveller in the forest he said, has just been granted eternal life by the crane. Both he and the crane are central figures in Taoist iconography apparently. Well, that got me so far; but, I now see laughter in magic or the other way around - magic in laughter. In either case it is a break out from order and perfection. The same joy as one might have in finding a banana skin on a Japanese railway station platform. Never – what never? Well, hardly ever: usually you can eat off them.

It may seem odd now but this artistic encounter was curiously liberating. What I now felt able to look for in the search for appropriate university governance could have contradictory elements to it, surprises. I could be attracted to the aesthetics of order [not that I now see university management as aesthetically pleasing] but would be setting the ordered against the exceptional. In methodological terms, how would this be? My note went on:

That set me thinking – a slow developing thought about the strange, age-old juxtaposition in this part of the world between Confucianism and Taoism; [Chapter 21] the one confirming order, hierarchy, linearity, the other hinting at action in inaction, the creative tension of Ying and Yang, non-linearity: the possibility of surprise. And, I now think, laughter.

The sciences and social scientists have been rather slow to come to non-linearity. Physics got there the empirical way but not without a stretch of the imagination as things became too small to see and left the oddest of traces in the sand – so to speak. Actually economics was sort of there from the start, leaving to metaphor – ‘the hidden hand’ – what the logic-choppers of the market could not fully explain. [The hand is still at work stirring the spirals of inflation, popping the dot-com bubbles...] Sociology, I now find, has some serious things to say about it

I was referring to some writers on the management of ecosystems who made a point that could be applied to the knowledge business as a whole;

.... “In principle .. there is an inherent unknowability, as well as unpredictability, concerning these evolving, managed ecosystems and the societies with which they are linked”.³

3 Holling, C. S., Berkes, F. and Folke, C. (1998). ‘Science, Sustainability and Resource Management’, in Birkes, F. and Folke, C. eds Linking Social and Ecological Systems Cambridge UP, a great read for a Japan winter evening.



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How do we expect universities to manage their professors in ways that enable them to approach the unknowable or the unpredictable?

To address this question we have to put the particular issue into a wider context. Organizations, of which universities are one example among many, are complex things. All sorts of different things have to be done within them and therefore we may expect to find different bits being governed or managed in differing ways. Management techniques are varied, evolving from practice but subsequently thought about and written about as stand-alone ideas. Out of context, however, they may appear to be of universal application, when perhaps they are not.

Universities exist to advance knowledge. Some form of assessment of 'contribution to knowledge' would seem to be appropriate. But knowledge is diverse and pluralistic. There are many kinds of knowledge; innumerable subjects and divisions and subdivisions within a subject and no clear boundaries. What appear to be hybrids, such, as bio-chemistry, can suddenly take on a centrality to current intellectual concerns.

How to assess a person's contribution to knowledge is also difficult. Knowledge changes. A person may work at a problem of apparent obscurity, assessed as irrelevant, [and so not get published] only to make a breakthrough and reveal a new way of thinking that becomes central to the discipline. By contrast, someone working at the apparent center can fade into obscurity in the longer run.

University academic assessment has to be realistic, and modest, and accept the fact that Albert Einstein would probably have failed any current test of performance. He wrote four key articles that are regarded as the foundations of a new way of thinking. They were all produced within two years, and all before he became an employee in any university – he was in fact a patents clerk.

The problem arises when a centralised management system attempts to rank contributions upon a universal scale. In the UK academic performance is assessed through:

- ◆ A quality assessment of articles published in leading academic journals.
- ◆ An assessment of teaching - use of equipment, frequency of student contact and the like.
- ◆ An assessment of contribution to university life, committee membership, etc.



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And as a late runner, some kind of concern for the usefulness of the resultant ideas for society as a whole.

Current performance measures each have an evolutionary history, although now contorted by central direction. The value of a piece of intellectual work is in principle established by its recognition by other academics. An article submitted to a journal is only published if peers recognise its contribution to current debate. A scholar is only promoted if peers recognize that her/his work has added value to disciplinary knowledge and institutional reputation. A teacher is recruited to join a faculty if peers think that students will have their minds turned on by his/her ideas. This was a plural social order founded in mutual interest. University governance historically emerged as a loose way of ensuring that this order could thrive. This order does not survive central direction. In recent decades the approach has been captured by central government which has driven a centrally determined and administered set of nationwide standards and expectations through the university system. Some elements may look the same. Some elements of peer review survive, but central direction alters their character.

The new system attempts to batter a heterogeneous, plural process for estimating individual worth or contribution in relation to the immense diversity of knowledge into a uniform, hierarchical system of ranking. To do so knowledge itself has to be knocked into shape; disciplinary divisions reinforced, journals ranked on the basis of their purity of abstraction, awkward oddities [where innovation might be found] driven to the margin.

An individual's publication record, to which can now be attached a number, remains at the center of the new system and it is here that the greatest risks/possibilities of system corruption can be found. There are two kinds of risk at least:

- ◆ publication 'inflation'; more articles, more journals, same amount of knowledge;
- ◆ standardisation; academic review leading to acceptance of conformity with prevailing understandings rather than transformation or paradigm shift.

It is quite unlikely that the new system will survive. No, let me put that more positively, it is likely that individual thinkers will find ways around the system or of corrupting the system so that they can again locate their own endeavours in relation to the full complexity of publicly available knowledge in any sphere, assess themselves through the relations that they build with others in their field

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and be encouraged to persevere through recognition of the frailty and impermanence of centrally driven systems. The system will not attempt to put everyone into line, rank them in order and promote them on resultant 'merit'.

It is nevertheless useful to go back to the opening question. Why did a centralised performance management system drive out, incorporate or subordinate a plural system of peer assessment? Hypothesis one is that it is simply down to 'modernisation', the pursuit of fashionable ideas: centralisation in the name of decentralisation is 'in'. Hypothesis two elaborates upon hypothesis one to note that the new system suits the holders of power. To examine these ideas, it is necessary to have a way of thinking about types.

Types of Performance Management

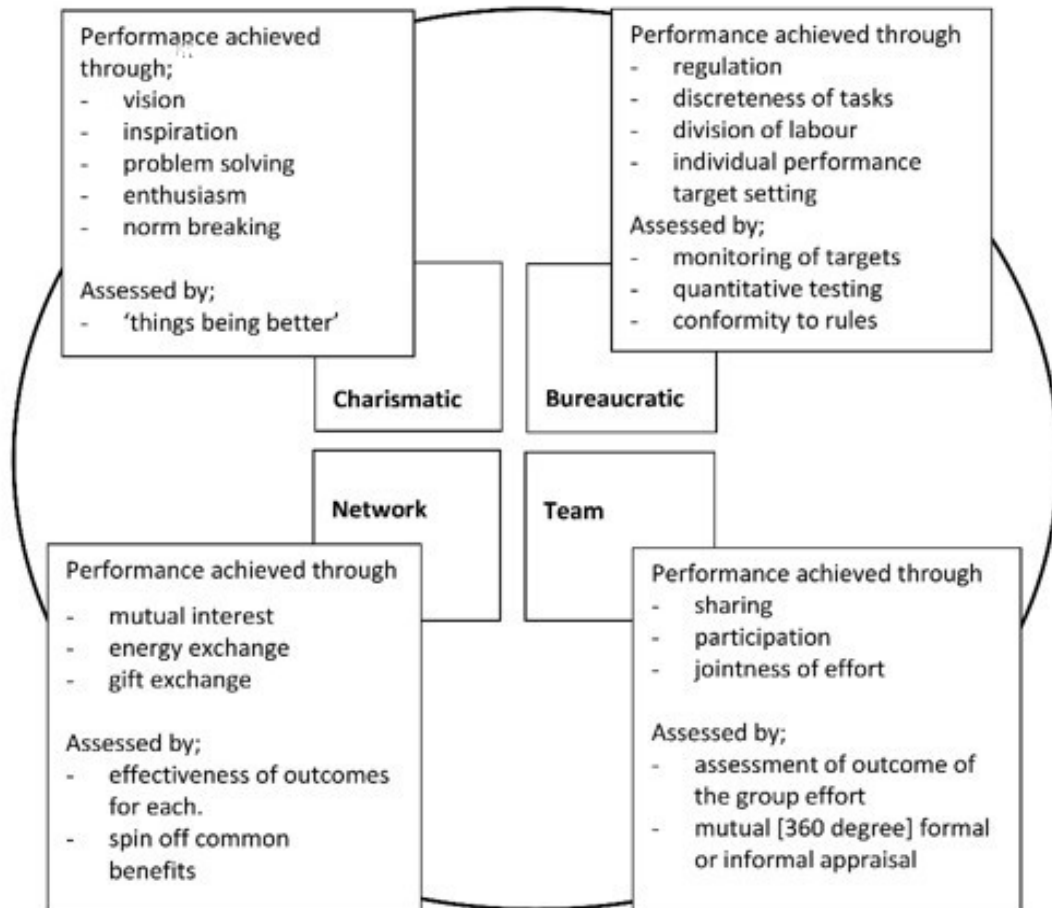
The UK universities' chosen means of performance measurement can be set against a typology of types of performance management. I derive this typology from Cultural Theory ⁴ and set it out in mandala like structure in respect of the Buddhist influence that seems to be asserting itself in this paper. This theory can be used to note the different values and social dynamics that are to be found in hierarchies, groups, individualistic networks and a fourth type that I here identify positively as charismatic. Performance within social contexts in which one or other of these value systems are dominant will be an outcome of the expression of these values. Figure 9 summarizes the typology.

Figure 9:

Performance management Approaches

(next page)

4 Mary Douglas (1986) *How Institutions Think* Syracuse; Syracuse university Press; Michael Thompson, Richard Ellis and Aaron Wildavsky (1990) *Cultural Theory* Westview Press, Boulder, San Francisco and Oxford.



The first stage of the underlying argument is that different forms of assessment suit different styles of working:

- ◆ Hierarchies will seek performance through setting tasks, demanding conformity with rules and quantitative monitoring of outcomes from the center. People who are comfortable working in hierarchies will expect this form of task-setting and control.
- ◆ Effective teams work in a group sharing mode, members achieving good performance through monitoring each other informally (controlling free riders through gossip if not through formal mutual review procedures).
- ◆ Individualists undertaking exchange in the market or building social networks are constantly appraising their own performance and that of partners and taking corrective action.
- ◆ Charismatic leadership - most likely in contexts where followers are alienated, and rules no longer work, is also self-assessing. If the outcome



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is good and becomes acceptable then it is accepted. No external agent can appraise such transformative action.

The second stage of the underlying argument is that different styles of working – and value system – suit different kinds of task;

- ◆ Hierarchies are good at routines, where the value added lies in the efficiencies to be gained in standardization and repetitive action.
- ◆ Groups can be problem solving and creative where the value to be added is unpredictable and the contribution of each participant is not readily measured.
- ◆ Individualists create value through exchange – the task lending itself to immediate assessment.
- ◆ Charismatic leaders [Chapter 11] are called for when the task is apparently impossible – something has to be recreated out of breakdown – chaos. Though this situation sometimes exists, even within universities, it is not the norm and will be left aside in the following sections.

What kind of tasks are involved in 'advancement of knowledge'?

If the goal of any university is the advancement of knowledge, it is quite reasonable to suggest that objectives may include to research and to teach. My own bit of a university would also have claimed that 'engagement with the world of practice' is a valid approach to the advancement of knowledge - in this case about governance institutions. But research and teaching - which we also did - also suggest some activity of the mind. So it is plausible to argue for causal links between these and the goal. But are they adequate and if adequate, is the essence of what is to be achieved through them - namely advancement of knowledge – measurable?

Medieval scholars clearly struggled with these issues and came up with contrasting formulae. Besides studying books, all were required to pray. Some took contemplation very seriously and shut themselves away. Others were required to struggle with the things of everyday life such as farming, and some were required also to teach. These techniques had their limitations which the Renaissance sorted out, or so we are told. But is there not at least a point in having to 'engage with the real world' as a recognised good thing?

Come to the measurement. Research is one way in which knowledge about something can be advanced; no doubt. But is the number of articles published over a fixed time span a measure of this advancement?



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One way of assessing the value of articles is to think of the half dozen articles in your chosen field that you could identify as having had the most impact over the last decade. The test would be that - after reading such an article - you have had to think differently. In reality, most academics would be very lucky if they could honestly claim that they had written one of them. One article in a much longer period - which they almost certainly will not have written - makes the whole discipline think again. I doubt if there would be serious dissatisfaction in any chosen field if overall advancement were at this rate.

Some of the other stuff that is produced is worth reading. Most people who survive in a university setting will genuinely be able to claim that they have written a few pieces that have been worth reading. But the idea that each researcher should produce two point something articles over a fixed time period is ludicrous. It can only be explained as a mechanistic response to constraints imposed by a management fixated upon mechanistic measures acting to enforce a hierarchical order within a competitive environment. It is sustained by conspiracies of peer self-preservation in discipline based journals. It would not happen were it not for the Vice Chancellors seeking competitive advantage by attempting to prove the vitality, obedience or whatever, of their academic staff when compared to others. Knowledge is then but a bit player.

What is better is some measure of whether ideas are useful to anybody. Citation indicators go some way in this direction but encourage a closed academic process - a fallback to basic binary processes of recognition or reward that will ensure only that "as Humperdinck (2008) so pertinently notes..." is reciprocated with "Pumpnickel's penetrating observation (2009) confirms...." - otherwise known as mutual back-scratching. Ideas being useful to somebody should presumably take into account a wider range of bodies than fellow academics. This is recognised in more recent iterations of government directions to the university performance assessment.

The real world does not measure the value of ideas in terms of a quantum of articles in university journals or books, but in innumerable other forms, principally the embodiment of the resultant ideas in some practical technique for bettering human existence [though that is a bit of an elusive quality]. Many such advancements should be measurable, if they really must be measured. To do these things as well as jump through the performance hoops of mechanistic publication, is not to do anything well.

Micro Politics and Organisational Perversity

Perhaps the most common of organisational perversities is for the means to become the message. The 20th Century developed three competing models

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about organisational behaviour - though from all the management hype one would think that there were many more. These are the hierarchy model, the team model and the individualist model. Each has its appropriate form of management.

In terms of motivation there are also two approaches. The one assumes that performance incentive is 'inherent to position'. The incentive to perform should come, in the case of the hierarchical organisation, from promotion chances, in the case of the team, from the interdependency of the team in getting the job done and in the individualistic organisation from the intrinsic personal reward of a satisfactory job done. The 'inherent reward' approach assumes that individuals are themselves goal oriented. Often they are, sometimes they are not. It is also assumed that universities and other organisations allow or encourage these inherent motivation factors to work. Often they do not. As a result, universities, along with many other types of 'modern' organisation find themselves adopting the second approach which is to establish a separate behavioural game.

This game equips a central management with sticks and carrots. It requires externally administered performance measurement. The fact that incentives - rewards and punishments are externalised from the unit of production to an agent of central control - latent Marxists hidden in the woodwork would recognise this as alienation - means that individual academics are obliged to play the game. In consequence academic performance becomes geared to meeting the measure rather than achieving the purpose:

- ◆ producing the necessary number of articles in the necessarily prestigious, if perhaps consequentially incestuous journals; rather than searching for a star idea;
- ◆ teaching the requisite number of classes, limiting student contact hours to the minimum required by the teaching performance measure; rather than nurturing a meeting of minds;
- ◆ sitting on the minimum necessary number of committees or undertaking the least onerous collegiate tasks to fulfill the statutory third type contribution to the functioning of the university; rather than experiencing the buzz that comes to self and to others when generating a true learning environment.

How did it come to this?

The short answer could be that universities, along with many other public bodies have taken their management ideas out of handbooks - decidedly dated handbooks - of industrial management. The broad lessons coming out of the



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management gurus seem to be that hierarchical organisations can be good at mass production kind of things, while more varied, unpredictable or difficult - dare I say intelligent things - need to be done in teams or sometimes by motivated individuals.

Advancement of knowledge obviously has to have some shape and order to it but, it is best done by people who are able and motivated to have their wits about them and to work with a high degree of discretion. Industry, it seems is currently becoming fairly sensible about this. Management gurus are of course driving the process to extremes. They are telling industrial magnates that their success in a competitive world depends upon turning whole enterprises into outward looking, customer responsive and above all innovative organisations. This requires decentralised, flexible structures. But even in the bad old days when production lines were commanded from on high, a specialist research and development unit (R&D) was allowed to organise itself into a team that could be goal oriented, flexible, with a degree of independent responsibility.

Universities in Britain now have set production targets and constraints on the teaching side. They have relatively long hierarchies within each university and face above them a tertiary education sector which, in turn, specifies how much of different kinds of goods (students of different kinds) are to be produced. The research side of university production might be thought to show a more responsive process. People have to put forward proposals for funding which are competitively judged. Another kind of research comes from enterprising academics forming contracts with businesses or other agencies which share an interest in solving a shared knowledge problem. So this is an area in which we do find individuals, or more often teams, committing themselves to the task and getting the inherent rewards. Maybe this is the way to go. But will university bosses be content to have their institutions assessed on the basis that there are motivated teams at work, that research funding is brought in, or, on the teaching side, that creative minds are stimulating new generations of creative minds? Or will mechanistic control remain the dominant mode of operation and the dominant culture - to the extent that many enterprising or simply thoughtful academics search for pastures new?

The theory of organisational perversity

But because of size, complexity and an apparent ability to avoid death, universities in Britain as in Japan tend to accumulate other logics, logics that detach the exercise of power from sensible decision making about incentives and controls. Modernisation - as I tried to assert in Japan, against a curious flow of optimism - makes matters worse, adding spurious logics, giving power to bureaucrats turned messianic reformers, quite neglecting task, above all;

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ignorant of the life giving powers of the Daoist Immortal Magu. Immortality - of mind anyway - has come to Darwin, to Einstein... who else? The Vice Chancellors do not have it in their gift to bestow immortality upon the potential greats of the 21st Century, but they probably have the power to take it away.

What we actually find is one set of rationalisations - those relevant to promoting the power of the bosses in this and many other instances, contradicting those relevant to sustainable small batch or unit production - to put industrial labels on the case in point. We all recognise this kind of situation. Where this contradiction leads to thought, reflection, debate, and corrective action or sensible compromise, we tend to see these contradictions as creative tension. Where it leads to the suppression of creative energy, alienation, token compliance, absenteeism and stress, let us call this a perverse outcome and try to avoid it.