Thinking Big: Omnipotence and Academic Life

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My book *The Madness of Knowledge* (Connor 2019) of a few years ago suggested that the human relationship to knowledge is deeply corrugated, if also irrigated, by uncertainty. Though we name ourselves *Homo sapiens*, the knowing animal, the fact that knowledge is often the object of such immoderate desire – all humans by their nature desire to know, is the assertion that opens Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (Aristotle 1993, 3) – means that we have difficulty in simply coinciding with our knowledge, and even more difficulty in paying attention to and making sense of our pressing desire for it. Getting the measure of our vexed relationship to our own knowledge, not in terms of epistemology, or what we can know about knowing, but epistemopathy, or all the turbid things we feel about knowing, was a tall enough order. But in the writing I am currently doing I am aiming to think even bigger, in trying to take the measure of the more general but equally insatiable appetite for the immeasurable itself, which the desire for omniscience seems to promise. I hope to get away with calling this, hyperbolically enough you may feel, the phantasmology of exorbitance. Among the topics into which I hope to enter is the disposition of rational and irrational feelings about omnipotence, as a preoccupation of theology, psychoanalysis and philosophy of science, to name only those for the moment. With all of these, the conditions of what we nowadays know as academic life overlap mightily.

Omnipotence is a slippery and precipitous thing. Most of the time, the thought of omnipotence obeys a logic of approximation, according to which it will always seem preferable to have more power than less, or than one has had heretofore. The deepest problems arise, not with the asymptotic forms of omnipotence, but with the imagination of omnipotence in its absolute if-I-ruled-the-world form, towards which those asymptotic forms must tend: the condition of being capable of anything, or, somewhat more darkly, being incapable of any incapacity whatsoever.

There is a long tradition in Christian theology in particular of perturbation at the paradoxes involved in the idea of an omnipotent deity. These centre on different versions of the possibility that the deity's omnipotence would be bound to be self-exceeding, and on the effort to extricate the deity from the diabolical perplexities into which the very effort to maintain the doctrine of divine omnipotence must convey him. The doctrine that God is capable of anything runs up the moment after the claim is made against examples of things that God could not do without betraying his nature, which is not only to be omnipotent, but also to be all-knowing, merciful and maximally good. So it must not be possible for God to perform any kind of evil action. Similarly, to lower the grade of objection from morality to physics, it cannot be allowed to be possible for God to make a rock which it would be impossible for him to lift, the so-called Paradox of the Stone, even though, bizarrely and concerningly, such a thing is well within the capability of humans. Over and over again, theories of omnipotence come up against the objection that God cannot act against his own nature (again, it appears that not only can humans do this, they can scarcely avoid doing it), which seems to imply that God's own nature must act as a limit on his omnipotence. It is hard, therefore, to hide from the implication that God cannot be omnipotent, since it is in his nature to be limited by his own nature. God seems, as it were, to be cis-omnipotent, stuck with the nature he has been assigned with, even if he is imagined as assigning it to himself. And being stuck with your own nature does not sound very omnipotent at all: indeed, it sounds all-too-human, and just the kind of thing that prompts omnipotence fantasies in humans.

I hope it will be plain that the aim of this scandalously casual caricature of Scholastic argument is not to suggest that the idea of an omnipotent God is a snare and a delusion. It obviously is, but it is not part of my present purpose to persuade anyone of the fact. If anything, I want to suggest that the conviction of God's omnipotence is a mistake that humans seem not to be able to help making, and that the form of the mistake is constitutive of the impassioned because irresolvably imperfect relation that human beings have to the thought of their own power.

The thought of omnipotence, which exercises such abiding and immoderate fascination over human thought, reveals quickly that

actual omnipotence (which would have to be omnipotence of thought itself, for why hamstring your omnipotence by forcing it to act through clumsily material mediations?) would be at best an absurdity and at worst little short of a nightmare, just the kind of combination which one might expect to focus the mind. The 'Rat-man', whose case is described in Freud's 'Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis', lived in dread of the negative consequences of his thoughts, which he believed were capable of causing literal harm to their objects (Freud 1953-74, 10.232-3). Believing may here mean either that he forced himself to suspend his disbelief in such a power; or perhaps that he allowed himself to. There is, as Freud points out, something of the uncanny in the relation that human beings have to their own thoughts, which though they can seem thrillingly possessed of excursive and executive power ('Fly, my beauties!') can also easily provoke the fear that they may recoil upon one, this a recurrent subject of myths and traditional tales about the danger of imprudent wishes. This may apply in particular to the wish for others not to be there, the complement to the imperial need for them to be there on demand to execute your will. It may be that the widespread fear of the dead comes from the suspicion that they will get to know after their deaths that we actually wanted them dead and will come looking for revenge. When children, or the children who abide in us, think vengefully, 'you'll be sorry when I am dead', they are perhaps promising that our remorse for causing their deaths will make us long to come back and be dead as they are.

Freud's notion of omnipotence of thought, which indicates that omnipotence is really the reflexive thought of the power of thought itself, beings together weakness and power, through its focus on the figure of the child, for whom omnipotence is a compensation, sometimes, serene, sometimes vehemently vengeful, for the limits to thought increasingly offered by objective reality. The role of the object (*ob* + *iacere*, we hear the word itself blurt it out every time we use it), is to be that against which one is thrown, that against which the mind, our saying seems to say, comes up short. Even God and in fact, as we have seen, especially God, runs into the roadblock of his own omnipotence.

For Freud, the omnipotence of thoughts derives from the magical beliefs of the child, beliefs that he thought recall those of early humans, even if, refusing to be paid off, they continue to blackmail

the humans who reassure themselves of their adulthood (Freud 1953-74, 13.86). The theory of childhood omnipotence is that, confronted with the withdrawal or absence of various satisfactions, the child substitutes fantasied or symbolic forms of them. If its cries succeed in prompting the supply of nourishment or comfort it lacks, it may develop an unconscious theory that it has itself conjured them up. If not, it has at least the what-if or wouldn't-it-be-nice power of wish-fulfilling hallucination, which we know can go a very long way indeed. Thereafter, the best way for the fantasy of the omnipotent self to survive contact with the reality principle is for to be delegated to others, to whose omnipotence one has conditional but still to some degree executive access. The idea of an omnipotent deity has been the favoured form of delegated omnipotence, but it can also be subcontracted into various other fantasised forms. Heinz Kohut saw the psychoanalyst, as an idealised form of Lacan's one-supposed-to-know, fulfilling this role for the narcissistic analysand. Other omnipotence substitutes, or 'vice-existers' in Beckett's phrase, might be abstractions like Law, Art, History, the Party and, most of all for present purposes, knowledge itself and those who are at once its retainers and adherents, priests, wizards, scholars and thinkers.

Education, or the increase in humans of what in machines we designate processing capacity, has proved for the most part remarkably effective at minimising or even undoing the damage caused by psychological and neurological infirmity. High levels of education are proving to be remarkably effective, for example, at retarding the progress of certain forms of dementia. There are, however, certain kinds of mental incapacity or psychological deficit which education tends to amplify, chief among them the large and varied class of narcissistic disorders. In this, education may be thought of as parallel to systematic religious belief, with which, of course, it has marched together for many centuries in human cultures. In the cases both of education and of religious belief, the increase in cognitive capacity results, on the whole and in general, in greater capacities for the modulation of individual appetites and the toleration of frustration. However, in both cases, the respect accorded to those who are charged with the development of socialising mental and moral capacities, the priest, doctor and, same word, teacher, means that they are especially liable to the development of narcissistic forms of self-regard and the even more intractable fantasies of omnipotence which it is the function of

education to inhibit. One might even say that it is part of the structural accommodation made with the members of those professions and institutions, that their reward comes in very large part in terms of the esteem to which they are encouraged to feel entitled. It has been an important part of the esteem accorded to the bearers and exponents of knowledge that it should in fact be much more limited than that of beauty-queens and field-marshals. The beginnings of formal philosophy give us Aristophanes as well as Socrates. The simmering resentment at the underestimation of their powers as the unacknowledged legislators of the world, and their compensatory overestimations, are defining features of the subsymptomatology of academic life.

Media

From the earliest times, academics, denizens of the Academy, which was at once time, an actual location, next to an olive grove sacred to Athena to the north of Athens, but often thereafter imagined to be a bookish fairyland known as Academia, have been thought of, and have enjoyed thinking of themselves, as inhabiting a magic realm apart from the workaday world of getting and spending. The growth of medieval universities, inaugurated by the al-Qarawiyyin mosque at Fez founded by Fatima al-Fihri in 857, actualised the idea of learning as inhabiting and constituting a heterotopia, which was both set apart from what was often contemptuously known as 'the world' and yet furnished a kind of intramundane mirror or fractal reiteration of it. The apartness of academies doubles the interlocking of scales by which the mind, taking the measure of its pitiable tininess in relation to the cosmos, can nevertheless wrap itself round the cosmos through that very conception. This was a well-known conception of the mutual commutability of scales before it was noted by Pascal, when he wrote: 'Through space the universe grasps and engulfs me like a pinpoint: through thought I can grasp it. ... Man's greatness lies in his capacity to recognize his wretchedness' (Pascal 1995, 36). This may be why knowledge, as Barabas's 'infinite riches in a little room' (Marlowe 1969, 349) is so compact with enclosure, and why every apparent increase in the capacity for publicity generates powerful fantasies of secrecy.

For most of human history, it has been a laborious and expensive affair to produce representations of the real, meaning that images

have always been massively outnumbered by realities, and models have lagged painfully behind actualities. That relation has inverted in the last century. One of the side-effects of the overtaking of realities by images, to the point of what Jean Baudrillard famously diagnosed as the 'precession' or preeminence of simulacra over their origins (Baudrillard 1983, 2), has been that the heterotopia or parochial para-space of universities has begun to expand into the itself ever-expanding world of media. During the 1950s, universities were, unknown to themselves (such being the ways of omnipotence), the factories in which this new world was being conceived and constructed, in the form first of computational engines and then the aggregation of those engines into computerised networks. Wondering what the factory of the future might look like, Vilém Flusser's startling answer is that it would look like a school: 'The factory of the future will have to be the place where *homo faber* becomes *homo sapiens sapiens* because he has realized that manufacturing means the same thing as learning – i.e. acquiring, producing, and passing on information' (Flusser 1999, 50).

Having been the means of production of this new digital means of social production and reproduction half a century before, universities in the last two decades have themselves begun to be produced and reproduced by means of these very same systems of knowledge and communication. In the teens of this century, it seemed possible that earthbound universities might 'migrate' to an electronic and extraterrestrial condition. In fact, such a movement has proved to be unnecessary in the light of the massive internal colonisation of every corner of the lifeworld by systems of electronic mediation, which has allowed the mass migration or satellisation as Baudrillard called it (Baudrillard 1983, 149), of almost the whole of life away from its embodied forms.

In our present era, what Lacanian psychoanalysis calls the Big Other, or the symbolic order, is converging ever more absolutely with the autopoetic encyclopedia of that singularised pleroma we call 'media'. Lacan contrasts the little other, or 'objet petit *a*', of particular objects desired by particular subjects to the Big Other of language and the symbolic order. The Big Other is what places the subject in the position of never being able to coincide with the intersections and intercessions that nevertheless give it its

coordinates, in the manner of the mid-Atlantic mariner steering by the stars. The Big Other stands for what can never be mastered or accommodated to, even as it is itself also the solicitation to that mastering. From my present perspective, the most important thing, it now appears, about the Big Other is not at all its otherness. It is its bigness, or the otherness in particular of its bigness, and the bigness of its otherness.

Giorgio Agamben shows how language belongs to the genealogy of swearing, or the function of making true. But this is not the only or even perhaps the essential function of language. As part of the Big Other of the symbolic order it subserves, language also has an essentially auxetic or aggrandising function. Language pays reality the compliment of complementarity, for language always adds something to the reality it matches and masters. To Agamben's sacrament of language, through truthing, in or of language, in the archaeology of the oath, we should subjoin the function in thought and language, of boosting, boasting and exorbitance. This we might call the sacrament of supererogation, as represented by the possibility for little people like me of having big thoughts like these, which will always be at work in what Agamben calls the 'archaeology of glory' (Agamben 2017, 551-601),

In a media-saturated society, the imagination of power and the power of imagination converge, excitingly but also potentially catastrophically. This is part of what Michel Serres points to as the inexorable drift, or perhaps we had better say drive, from the hard to the soft, or from the physical to the symbolic both in nature and the special department of nature known as history. Genghis Khan had to put in a lot of horse-miles and high-precision archery to establish his empire. Stalin has been described as Genghis Khan with a telephone, and indeed symbolic networks can readily establish and maintain the kind of world-domination only previously attainable by expensively and exhaustingly galloping hordes.

Explicitation

Philosophy might be regarded simply as a mode of technological impatience. The history of psychoanalysis provides a parochial example of this impatience. Like other investigators of mental and psychological phenomena in the late nineteenth century, Freud had

the admirable ambition of providing the first truly scientific account of the workings of the mind, though the emergence of a truly experimental science of neurology would have to wait until the investigative opportunity provided by the catastrophic brain injuries of automated warfare, and the development of microsurgical techniques in the 1950s. Unable to wait that long, Freud precipitately developed the imaginary neurology that he called psychoanalysis. Useless for most practical neurological purposes, the imaginary neurology of psychoanalysis can sometimes prove to be a sensitive and adaptable instrument for the analysis of the workings of imagination.

Psychoanalysis participated in an explosion of what Peter Sloterdijk has characterised as explication, or in a closer approximation to what he calls *Explizierung*, of explicitation, or making-explicit (Sloterdijk 2004, 87). Explicitation is closely related to omnipotence thinking, in its modalities both of aspiration, and of anxiety. On the one hand, explicitation is essential to the anticipation of dangers and securing of humans against them, for example through the autonomisation and enhancement of immune systems, and through prediction and modelling of natural processes, from rainfall to earthquake, that allow for defence against them. This represents the replacement of the implicit by the explicit, of instinct by knowledge, and of unconscious by conscious mechanisms. As Adorno and Horkheimer predicted in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the command and control that has gradually been extended over the external world of nature has been succeeded by an ever more intensive and recursive exercise of self-engineering on the part of humans. Every year more and more academic disciplines are drawn away from innocent tinkering with abstract problems like the conundrum of divine omnipotence into this vast project of self-engineering. Peter Sloterdijk raised temperatures in 2009 with his provocative *Rules for the Human Zoo*, in suggesting that we have to accept our place in a long durée of anthropotechnic self-making, of which the scandalous eugenics of the first part of the twentieth century were an accent if also apparently an aberration.

> With the thesis of men as breeders of men, the humanistic horizons have been pried apart, so that the humanist can no longer only think, but can move on to questions of taming and nurture ... The humanist directs himself to the human, and

> applies to him his taming, training, educational tools. ... What is presented as reflections on politics are actually foundational reflections on rules for the maintenance of the human zoo. ... In city parks, national parks, provincial or state parks, eco-parks – everywhere people must create for themselves rules according to which their comportment is to be governed. (Sloterdijk 2009, 22, 25)

But if humans are putting themselves more and more in charge of things, this represents an ever-greater charge on them, in the sense of a burden of responsibility they must bear. If you are put in charge of something, it is surprisingly like the condition of being 'taken in charge', which used to appear in police reports, or being charged in the sense of being accused or required. When Gerard Manley Hopkins begins his poem 'God's Grandeur' with the words 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God' (Hopkins 1970, 66), he means, among other things, both that the world is saturated with divine grandeur, as a battery or cannon might be said to be 'fully charged', and that the world is placed under the necessity of acknowledging and magnifying that grandeur, as though in expiation of some offence laid to its account.

A world of ever more extensive forms of remote control and precautionary prediction produces an increase in responsibility and possible blame as well as an increase in the capacity for bold self-determination. In other words, the growth of self-determination steadily erodes the very possibility of the very freedom it was supposed to guarantee. The more fear is removed from our lives, the more subject we become to the fear of failing to maintain ourselves in a state of sufficiently fearful vigilance. Hence, perhaps the prominence of ceremonies of admonition, which had previously been the means of inducing obedient faith, in the face of everything that lay beyond the human power to control. The safety of our world is ensured by the fact that our lives are so full of alarms and warnings – like the shrieking fire-alarm regularly scheduled for 1pm on Tuesday afternoon in my college, the function of which is to demonstrate that the alarm system is in full working order, though its secondary effect is to render members of the college ever more expert in the techniques required to ignore it. The UK government announced in 2022 a system of emergency alerts that will enable a signal to be broadcast to phones and other devices in a particular

area, with the aid of a loud alarm that will override silence settings, warning of emergencies such as fire, flood, explosion, terrorist incidents, public health emergencies and demoralising philosophy, no doubt also issuing various kinds of command necessary to manage the emergency, or, increasingly as time goes by, to prevent the emergency from in fact emerging. The simultaneous incitement and deferral of emergencies of countless different kinds has become a means of psychopolitical subsistence (Connor 2017). Comprehension has become twinned with apprehension, even though this appears to be not nearly as unpleasant as might be thought, otherwise we would give it up. It has become a large part of the function of universities, in particular, as part of a larger world of institutions of knowledge production, to generate and disseminate these early warnings: how many news stories nowadays begin 'Scientists warn that ...'

Nowhere are these paradoxes of the fantasy of omnipotence more marked than in the areas of reproduction and climate, which form an apt couple, in their shared imperative to the examination and management of human futures. In technically advanced countries (and there is no country in the world, however technically retarded, that does not think of itself as more technically advanced than it ever was before), pregnancy and childbirth are safer for women than ever before in history. But the cost of that knowledge is that pregnancy has become proceduralised, monitored, administered and overseen by medical and sociomedical agencies, with the point of obstetric knowledge being that nothing should be left to chance. Knowledge, and the omnipotence function it subserves, has been subsumed in the work of continuous and *in saecula saeculorum* precaution.

The urge to reproductive omnipotence is equally visible in the work of ensuring what is called sustainability, which seems more and more like the well-behaved cousin of immortality. The science of sustainability, which is doubtless a technical problem of genuine moment, goes hand in hand with a burgeoning discourse of management and the incitement of forms of devotion and anxious observance that approaches the cultic. T.S. Eliot writes that 'our only health is the disease .... The whole earth is our hospital', and recalls a seventeenth-century usage in saluting 'the absolute paternal care/That will not leave us, but prevents us everywhere' (Eliot 1973,

181). To prevent in this sense means to come before, and therefore could sometimes actually be used in a sense precisely opposite to our current one, to mean to hasten or to bring about prematurely. Richard Whitlock wrote in 1654 that contentious and quarrelsome books 'prevent the *Worlds Doome,* and their *own,* not *staying* for the generall *Conflagration,* but *beginning it:* setting it on such a Fire of *Contention, Schisme,* & *Haeresie,* that that Bloud which can quench *Hell Fire,* cannot totally *extinguish* this' (Whitlock 1654, 230). Extending this sense, to prevent could also until the late seventeenth century mean to outdo, or excel, and so to go beyond by coming before. The work of making things happen has become identical with the work of a deterrence which is a prodigious self-prevention. The preventive or precautionary work of sustainability is designed to ensure that humans make no difference to things, in an inhibitive humility that is in fact secretly kin to a supremacism that claims a power and responsibility to keep thing at bay rather than to bring them about, or to bring about what is required to keep them at bay, a power greater than has ever before been conceivable for humans.

Allow me to recapitulate the points I have made here. Academic life is the embodiment of an intense will-to-omnipotence through knowledge. Having been forced for most of its history to inhabit an ambivalent space of powerlessness, the will-to-knowledge, understood as the expansion of the principle of explicitation, or taking charge, has become an ever more developed form of the administered society in which academic life, even and especially in the humanities, is taking a central role, through the exponentially magnifying powers of mediation and through the phantasmatics of knowledge they embody.

Let it not be thought that I am unaware of seeming an exponent of just such a discourse of exaggeration – or, in that symptomatic solecism, *over-exaggeration*, for mere exaggeration no longer seems to enough – as characterises the phenomenon I am describing. Even to be an exponent of such a phenomenon is to be drawn ironically into the voluptuous addiction to the exponential which is the tone and temper of our times.

The system of professional self-understanding at which I have been hinting usually enjoins that a presentation such as this will normally end with some kind of loin-girding summons to mental fight or, less often, a reassuring promise of a regime of eternal peace. I hope you

will agree that my own imminent defection, if not from academic life, then from the life of the university which typifies it, along with the conviction that has been quietly swelling in me for some time that it is more important for scholars and scientists to be interesting than important, relieves me of this ritual responsibility.

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