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„Things are not! They are embedded within their history, their development and can be changed.“ (Conference organizers)

„Fas. Sy us. S'ne act together.“ (Poster presenter)

# A plea for the cultivation of academic practice as a political practice – an incomplete essay in ten theses



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**The first and foremost question.** If I were asked to discuss exhaustively the relations between academia and politics, the first and foremost question I would aim to clarify was: What is art? This is so, because it is constitutive for the arts to embrace three aspects, which are not only of utmost importance for research and its teaching, but are *constitutive* for them either. These aspects are: (i) an *epistemic* function, (ii) a *moral* function, and (iii) a *necessary* realization of both epistemic and moral functions via *political practice*. Suggesting the latter aspect as necessary means that in order to fulfill the former two functions, they must be the result of people acting for the sake of acting, i.e. people practicing freedom, i.e. political practice. Or to put it in contrast to an opposing perspective: I say that would anyone aim to fulfill those functions by means of labor or work<sup>1</sup> alone, failure in both regards could be expected; which, in this context, means: (a) epistemically, promoting delusions rather than insight, (b) morally, promoting doing bad rather than doing good, and (c) concerning the moral deficiency: promoting unawareness of it – or worse: frankly promoting believe of the opposite (both unawareness and misconception are obviously related with the epistemic deficiency).

**A moral function?** It is also exemplification which provides a link to an essential, idiosyncratic element in every piece of art: the unique aesthetic experience from which it stems. Hence, engaging with a piece of art is every time also an exercise in bearing with the strangeness and the otherness of the perspective which it portrays. Since this otherness is constitutive for the piece of art, it in turn becomes an exercise in accepting this otherness, in recognizing it as a part of this world, existing for its own sake. This relation between the arts and autonomy has always been at the core of the humanistic idea of education,<sup>8</sup> and it obviously qualifies as *radically* humanistic.<sup>9</sup> And the relation is essential, because to qualify as a piece of art it must exemplify to be an end in itself. Engaging with art in turn thus demands and thereby fosters recognition of this autonomy by the engaging agent. Only then a beholder beholds a painting as a piece of art if beholding that painting is an end in itself, i.e. if it qualifies as play in Gadamer's words.<sup>7</sup> However, recognition of each other's autonomy for the sake of itself means entering the sphere of freedom: art, to be art, must exemplify festivity, i.e. people acting together for the sake of doing exactly that.<sup>7</sup>

**Why art?** So far, I suggest that the arts and (basic) research and its teaching have – besides undeniable differences between them – the mentioned three aspects and their relations in common and I shall try to make this plausible in a minute. However, whereas research and its teaching are obviously related to academia, this seems much less so for the arts. Hence, why this point of entry into the discussion? The reason is in in the relationship between the arts and politics being substantially different than the one between academia and politics. With Arendt I would say that since Plato, academia has been conceptualized in opposition to politics. Interestingly, Arendt suspected the roots of the hence created antagonism in Plato promoting the good (agathon) and not the beautiful (kalon) as the highest idea.<sup>2</sup> Basically, to shield the philosopher from the public life. Thus, the resulting gap between philosophy and politics was intended and remains hardly bridged until today. The consequences are important for the present matter: While it has become tradition to regard research and its teaching as apolitical despite their clearly political roots (just remember Socrates), the outcast arts did not have to share this burden and we can thus see more clearly in them what must remain concealed in academia.

**The political sphere.** So along the lines, I found that no matter how good, no matter how true, both the moral and the epistemic realms can only be governed autocratically. This is also so for Kant's categorical imperative: in the end it remains a sacrifice to one's own autonomy, a law (nomos) that a single one gives oneself (auto). The epistemic and moral realms are private; obviously, located in the world, but representing its limits rather than its essence. The world itself is that what is between, that what inter-ests, what divides and brings together. And only the recognition of the autonomy in the other *and* in the self brings forth what may rightly be called realizing freedom, i.e. allowing to explore that part of the world (as a disposition, a possibility of it) which can be (i.e. exist, become reality) if and only if people act autonomously (i.e. out of their own will) yet together respecting each other's and *building* on each other's autonomy. This is the political sphere, the public space which can truly be named *isonomous*<sup>10</sup> and which can neither be entered by force nor forced upon someone. It is by stemming from these grounds that we can forgive each other the unwilling consequences of our public decisions as well as begin anew together.

**From politics to realpolitik.** I have argued that both from a moral starting point (arts, and history, I suppose) as well as from an epistemic one (science, philosophy, mathematics) I end up at a radically humanistic perspective. It seems that organizing research and its teaching in a way that reflects this perspective could hence provide some protection from failing in both respects in the long run. This is due to properties of thought itself, and where free thinking can take place, art can exist, and people can enact their political disposition.<sup>11</sup> Yet one question we may want to ask ourselves at this point is: How is research and its teaching actually organized these days? There is an important distinction to be made right before beginning to speculate about answers to this question. I have little doubt that as long as people within academia are primarily concerned with doing research and its teaching, i.e. when they are working on their papers, when they are discussing their research with their colleagues, even mostly when they are teaching in the classroom, then they effectively are present as political agents. Then they encounter each other naturally with interpersonal respect, consider and weigh their various arguments in relation to the shared epistemic goals, come – upon reflection – to conclusions, and share their thoughts and actions leading there publicly. However, as soon as we talk about the organization of research and its teaching, i.e. who even has a place or a voice in the epistemic community, who gets their research proposal approved (or submitted), who gets which position in the “system”, then we are talking about the political constitution of academia. And the most intriguing property of the latter is probably that it appears almost entirely depoliticized these days. Instead of people acting and judging (and failing responsibly), it is largely four factors that govern academia: performance,<sup>12</sup> resilience,<sup>13</sup> excellence<sup>14</sup> within limitless competition.<sup>15</sup> All three represent governmental tools effectively transforming academics into self-optimizing agents continuously maximizing their utility with respect to highly interchangeable, partially entirely hollow,<sup>14</sup> external standards.<sup>16</sup> Their primary end is subjugation of the governed to any kind of provided standard. This is assisted by an ever-growing, bureaucratic apparatus implementing formal routines in the name of objectivity.<sup>17</sup> The result may be just as breath-taking as efficient: Universities, these days, appear as efficient, self-optimizing production chains of techno-bureaucratic, entirely depoliticized agents of the Eichmann-type.<sup>18</sup>

**Decisions and consequences, reason and judgement.** Why wasting time with such outdated reasoning? What bad could come from an orientation toward the good and the true (which for Plato were the same after all)? Does it not rather sound reasonable instead? Yes, it does, and this is exactly the point. Both good and truth answer to reason, and to reason alone. No matter if pure or practical, reason always is a matter of a single one in thought. Yet this is dangerous, both in epistemic and in ethical matters, because, just as Kant notes,<sup>3</sup> reason *requires* for its functioning the freedom “to make unobstructed *public* use of one's reason”. Furthermore, Kant rightly noticed that the mental capacity relevant in the scope of public matters is not reason but judgement related to taste, feeling and imagination rather than to thought.<sup>4</sup> Construing academia as apolitical easily misses that a reliable functioning of reason per se requires public embedding. However, in public matters “it is neither about knowledge nor about truth, but about judging and deciding, about the judging assessment and discussion of the shared world and decisions about how it should continue to appear and in which way we should act in it”.<sup>5</sup> Finally, this presentation is not about results in any form but about inviting such discussion.

**From the artistic to the epistemic community.** So far, so good, but why bother? Even if similar, in the end, the arts are not research, a gap remains, or is it not? Well, while I admit, that they are certainly not the same, I must insist that here it is the similarities that matter. Each experiment, also the one in the laboratory, each articulation of theory, and each model, as long as it models at least some aspect of the world, each of those must exemplify. Hence they represent, they are symbols, just like any piece of art. That they must pertain to the facts in addition, enhances their epistemic function, yet it is not solely based on their factuality. Furthermore, to do them justice, the researcher must engage with each of them as an irreducible unit of evidence that requires explanation. Understanding, if comprehensive, must be capable of explaining *all* the evidence, not just some portion of it which nicely fits a current consensus. Each piece of the whole, no matter how little, represents an ineluctable limit respected as such by comprehension. Hence, the world, the whole puzzle is coarse-grained, each grain a grain of truth, truly an end in itself. Thus, the direction is reversed: whereas in the arts it is the moral function that demands the epistemic one to be fulfilled either, in science it is the epistemic function that promotes the moral one. And at last, it remains not the single grain of truth that inter-ests (although it must be respected as such all along the way), but it is the whole coarse-grained network to which the researcher aspires: the different, yet all related grains in each other's and their relations' light. Only in that light they *make sense* at last. How is that network explored? In essence, by conversing and convincing. Instead of an artistic community, here we encounter an epistemic one. And we may call the process with which this community is so occupied reflective equilibration, yet, by all means, it remains a political endeavor, a practice of freedom. Force and violence have no say here; on the contrary, those who bow to those, are not banished from this sphere by the others, but by themselves for these forms of shaping the common world immediately compromise the epistemic goals (this again is how the moral function is promoted by the epistemic one). The law that binds the equals to be equals, to be truly *pares inter parem* is their will to understand, enacted freely by each and every one. It is the same law that makes each one of them an end in themselves, the structure of their world an *agora*, their perspective a radically humanistic one.

**Rehabilitating politics in academia.** When politics appears at all in academia they typically appear in morally questionable forms of organizational politics. However, I suggest this a symptom rather than a cause as the outlined organizational structure<sup>19</sup> of academia must denigrate any form of politics (principiis obsta!). Hence any kind of organization of people is countered by the introduction of a new type of standards and evaluative measures. This stabilizes the current modus operandi of academic government, enhances depoliticization and reduces the academics' belief in having any say in their own organization (in short: it reduces their power). If academia is not to entirely loose its meaning (which in my view can rely in nothing else than in fulfilling both its epistemic and moral functions), then these processes must be opposed. The political disposition of human beings clearly calls for *cultivation* rather than eradication. In short: If research and its teaching should remain activities of the people, by the people, for the people, we are urged to investigate the little spaces still left for politics within academia, and explore how they could be preserved and made more accessible, i.e. how people could practice their political disposition within academia.<sup>20,21</sup>

**An epistemic function?** If an assessment of the arts shall be capable to inform in any way about relations between academia and politics, then at least the assumption of an epistemic function of the arts must hold. In science, there are at least two reasons underlying its epistemic function: (i) social norms ensuring that scientific results pertain to facts, (ii) exemplification,<sup>6</sup> i.e. the fact that studies (both empirical and theoretical) embody the relations they represent. For instance, a correlation study can only thus count as evidence for the correlation it suggests because that correlation is actually present in its data. There obviously are no social norms constraining any object of art to the factual world and I would even suggest that the arts complement science epistemically so well *due* to their counter-factuality. However, exemplification has its role in the arts too, because every piece of art simply is a real object. That means (a) it is a physical object or (event-series), i.e. it can be grasped via the medium of physical space-time, (b) it is a semantic object (functions as a symbol?), i.e. it can be grasped via the medium of language, i.e. *the* medium of inter-subjective space, i.e. the world as that what is between us. In both ways, art relates to the world and hence, can inform about it.

**Hopes and expectations.** Frankly, my expectations are pessimistic, which is also due to my personal story. When I realized that *all* I can practically become within academia is a valuable asset regarding somebody else's plans, and that the only reason for being welcome at all was me behaving according exactly to that, I got sick, depressed and just wanted to quit. At those times I came across a sentence by Otto Hahn (one of the three scientists who were the first to split atoms): “We should learn from this that even the greatest technical achievements, the greatest so-called 'efficiency', the belief that anything can be done if it only promises success, that this cannot be the right world view. We must have reverence for human life again. It cannot be the purpose of a world view to use what thousands of years of development have put into the hands of people to destroy people themselves.” I actually consider the mechanisms put(!) so efficiently into work in academia nowadays very dangerous too. Their danger lies in their subtleness, in their lack of cruelty and brutality that would evoke immediate revolt. Their subtleness allows their dehumanizing potential to unfold in plain sight. The process has already started and I sincerely doubt that it can be halted, by academia the least. Yet, my hopes remain high. That is because my hopes do not reside with institutions or ideas but with people and what remains incomputable in them. As long as there are some, who never let become, what they must, all that they do, there is hope. There is no other use for this contribution than to realize that. Apart from being this, it serves no purpose. This – is a piece of art.

<sup>1</sup> The partition of human activity aiming primarily at an interaction with the environment (in the most general sense, i.e. including all sorts of physical, chemical, biological, social, cultural etc. forms of environment) into labor, work and action is the one introduced by Hannah Arendt in „The Human Condition“ (2018/1958, London: The University of Chicago Press; <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226586748.001.0001>). Please note that *political practice and action are not used as synonymous terms here: while I would suppose that politics and action (in the sense of Arendt) can be used synonymously, the notion of politics involves the notion of action in the Aristotelian sense introduced in opposition to the notion of making (see Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, VI, 5): „For while making (poiein) has an end other than itself, action (pratein) cannot; for good action itself is its end.“ While I think that the Aristotelian distinction between making and acting (as well as Arendt's distinction of labor, work and action) is both fruitful and important within the thoughts pursued here, I cannot agree with the introduction of any fundamental hierarchy between both constitutive aspects of human activity (in neither Aristotle's nor Marx's way). In Aristotle's case, postulating such a hierarchy is basically owed to his attempt to ethically(!) legitimize slavery, which illustrates two points: (i) ethical reasoning (Kantian practical reason) per se does not at all guarantee good action (on the contrary: both the greatest injustice and the greatest cruelties may be legitimized on mere ethical grounds; in that respect compare e.g. also A. Camus in “The Myth of Sisyphus” or “The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt”), which is due to action being the interactive equivalent of judgement rather than reason, and (ii) instrumentalization as an earmark of oppression. For the instrumentalization (and hence immediate corruption) of Aristotle's notion of action (to which I refer here as practice) as a tool for oppression (and – just along the way – an ancient legitimization of market fundamentalism), see also C. K. Stepiņa (1996), “Die Begriffe Praxis und Poiesis bei Aristoteles”, Maske und Kothurn, 42(2-4), 289-306, <https://doi.org/10.7767/muk.1996.42.24.289>. I interpret the apparent(!) unawareness of Aristotle concerning the inherent contradiction in the use of the hierarchy between acting and making as a tool (i.e. as a means to an end other than itself) as a prime example of the normative power of the factual, which in turn emphasizes the public*

importance of the preservation of time and space for engaging with the counter-factual, and hence on the importance of the arts as a complement to science which by its nature must pertain to facts.

<sup>2</sup> Arendt, H. (2020). Wahrheit gibt es nur zu zweien (3. Aufl.). München: Piper. Page 173.

<sup>3</sup> Kant, I. (2004/1784). Was ist Aufklärung? Utopie kreativ, 159, 5-10. Page 6.

<sup>4</sup> Kant, I. (2015/1790). Kritik der Urteilskraft. In: Kant. Die drei Kritiken. Köln: Anaconda.

<sup>5</sup> Arendt, H. (2016). Zwischen Vergangenheit und Zukunft. München: Piper. Page 300. [For the English original see: Arendt, H. (1968). Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought. New York: The Viking Press.]

<sup>6</sup> For an epistemic function of the arts in general and a more detailed discussion of the epistemic relevance of exemplification in science and the arts see especially Elgin, C. Z. (2017). True Enough. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

<sup>7</sup> Compare also Goodman, N. (1976). Languages of Art (2. ed.). Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.

<sup>8</sup> Compare Gadamer, H.-G. (1977). Die Aktualität des Schönen (2. Aufl.). Stuttgart: Reclam. According to Gadamer, the three characteristics of art are play, symbol and festivity.

<sup>9</sup> Compare also Liessmann, K. P. (2017). Geisterstunde: Die Praxis der Umbildung (2. Aufl.). München: Piper. Especially pages 180-181.

<sup>10</sup> Compare particularly Fromm, E. (2006). Beyond the Chains of Illusion. Bloomsbury. Especially pages 125ff.

<sup>11</sup> Compare Arendt, H. (2016/1963). On Revolution. Faber Modern Classics.

<sup>12</sup> Compare Arendt, H. (2018/1958). The Human Condition. London: The University of Chicago Press. Page 324.

<sup>13</sup> Cannella, G. S., & Koro-Ljungberg, M. (2017). Neoliberalism in Higher Education: Can we Understand? Can we Resist and Survive? Can we Become Without Neoliberalism? *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, 17(3), 155-162. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708617706117>

<sup>14</sup> Cannizzo, F. (2018). Tactical evaluations: Everyday neoliberalism in academia. *Journal of Sociology*, 54(1), 77-91. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783318759094>

<sup>15</sup> Moore, S., Neylon, C., Eve, M. P., O'Donnell, D. P., Pattison, D. (2017). „Excellence R Us“: university research and

the fetishisation of excellence. *Palgrave Communications*, 3, 16105. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2016.105>

<sup>16</sup> Carson, L., Bartneck, C., & Voges, K. (2013). Over-Competitiveness in Academia: A Literature Review. *Disruptive Science and Technology*, 1(4), 183-190. <https://doi.org/10.1089/dst.2013.0013>

<sup>17</sup> Compare also Clarke, C. A., & Knights, D. (2015). Careerising through academia: Securing identities or engaging ethical subjectivities. *Human Relations*, 68(12), 1865-1888. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726715570978>

<sup>18</sup> See e.g. Lohar, D. et al. (2019). On politics and precarity in academia. *Social Anthropology*, 27(2), 97-117. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12695>

<sup>19</sup> Whether Eichmann himself was of the Eichmann-type (as I call it here) may remain controversial, but is irrelevant. For Arendt's perspective on the characteristics of such an agent, see Arendt, H. (2006/1964). Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil. Penguin Classics. See also her lectures about evil.

<sup>20</sup> The structural, organizational similarities between marketized academia and totalitarian government are obvious, compare Arendt, H. (2017/1955). The Origins of Totalitarianism. Penguin Modern Classics.

<sup>21</sup> Or in other words: have access to their full potential as human beings. In this respect, compare especially Schiller, F. (2018/1795). Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen. Ditzingen: Reclam. Compare also Arendt, H. (2017). In der Gegenwart (2. Aufl.). München: Piper. Page 236: “... and our fundamental political aspiration to become a little more human wherever we can”.

<sup>22</sup> It is important to note that a focus on sustainability or cultural diversity does not suffice. On the contrary, in the worst case it further obscures the most urgent objective which is people transforming themselves into commodities and internalizing the delusion that the better they are at doing that, the better they are. At the moment, humanity is effectively dehumanizing itself from within, and universities are the leading organizations in that endeavor. That must be stopped. A focus on sustainability or cultural diversity merely optimizes production processes such that the products (i.e. what was once people) are leanly produced and come in all flavors, yet they taste all the same.