# Wisdom's Limit: Truth, Failure, and the Contemporary University

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ABSTRACT: An ancient tradition has it that wisdom is founded, not in the accumulation of what is known, but rather in awareness of ignorance, of what is not known, of the proper limits to knowledge. Such a conception of wisdom sets wisdom in sharp contrast to the contemporary obsession with information and 'evidence' as the supposed basis for judgment and decision, and on discrete 'competencies' as the basis for educational attainment. In this paper I shall explore the connection between wisdom and limit, and just what this connection might imply, not only for the character of university teaching and research, but also for the manner in which universities structure and administer themselves. A broader set of social and political implications will also be touched upon.

When philosophers talk of wisdom, they most often begin with the origins of such talk, and indeed with the origins of philosophy, the love of wisdom itself, among the Greeks – especially with the famous discussion of *phronesis*, practical wisdom, in Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*. I want to begin with someone a little more contemporary, someone who is usually thought a little more relevant to the current situation, namely, that great Scottish enlightenment philosopher, often seen as one of the prophets of the modern age, Adam Smith. Towards the end of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, a book that deserves to be much more widely read than I think it actually is, Smith argues in favour of a certain modesty that ought to belong to human reason and an appropriate specificity of focus:

> The happiness of the great system of the universe, however, the care of the universal happiness of all rational and sensible beings, is the business of God and not of man. To man is allotted a much humbler department, but one much more suited to the weakness of his powers, and to the narrowness of his comprehension: the care of his own happiness, of that of his family, his friends, his country… The most sublime speculation of the contemplative philosopher can scarce compensate the neglect of the smallest active duty (*The Theory of Moral Sentiments*)

It is this modest conception of both reason and the proper use of reason that I want to explore today as an essential element in any genuine understanding of wisdom. In this respect, my emphasis will be slightly different from the usual orientation towards the

treatment of wisdom in terms of what sometimes amounts to a form of practical knowledge or expertise (a reading of wisdom that seems to me particularly well-exemplified, almost to the point of caricature, in Hubert Dreyfus' treatment of *phronesis* in relation to his idea of "skilled coping"). What I intend to focus on is not primarily wisdom as practical or as experientially based, but rather the *limit* that properly belongs to wisdom, hence my title, 'wisdom's limit'.

I want to focus my discussion not merely on wisdom, however, but also on wisdom as it might appear in that most contested of terrains, contemporary higher education. That wisdom might indeed belong in such a context is suggested by one of the most famous discussions of the university in the last two hundred years – Newman's lectures on 'The Idea of the University'. Although Newman does not explicitly address wisdom as such, talking rather of knowledge, his main focus is nevertheless on education, and so also on knowledge, understood as a tied to the formation of character, and here surely, some notion of wisdom, or the beginnings of wisdom, is surely implicit. Newman argues that knowledge is its own end, that there is no other good to which it is subordinated – nothing else to which it is accountable – and that, therefore, the basis of the University is not any *practical* utility to which it may give rise, but simply its commitment to knowledge which is a good in itself. For this reason Newman regards education, which he distinguishes from the training or the gaining of skill, as also without utility – education, like knowledge, accounts for itself. Certainly education is essential to sociability and to the formation of a society, but this is not to be construed as one of the *uses* of education, but rather is that with which education is already essentially bound up. The university can thus be understood, through the focus on education, as given over to the cultivation of wisdom – the pursuit of knowledge turns out to be one of the ways in which wisdom is developed, and, indeed, the pursuit of knowledge cannot be undertaken except against that background.

Although it is something of a diversion from my main theme, it is worth noting that the emphasis on the pursuit of knowledge, of education, of wisdom, for its own sake, is a key point in the understanding of the nature of the sort of work that universities undertake or ought to undertake. The pursuit of knowledge, and the promotion of education and wisdom, cannot be maintained by focussing on any system of rewards or punishments

that lie outside the enterprise of knowledge or wisdom as such. We know anyway, from many empirical studies, that such approaches are of little actual help in encouraging achievement in any field other than the most basic – the imposition of targets often has the effect of depressing achievement rather than raising it, financial incentives or disincentives have little or no effect above a certain fairly low threshold. Genuine academic industry has its origins in the pursuit of knowledge as itself valuable, and not in any extraneous factor or consideration. It is the valuing of knowledge, truth and wisdom for their own sake, and the valuing of the critical engagement that belongs with them, that is the only genuine means by which their pursuit can be promoted. Anything else is likely to distort, to mislead, and ultimately to undermine. This also means that the one thing that matters in the valuation of epistemic success can only be that success itself, and that success is always gauged by the epistemic community in which that success arises. The argument here is, I would say, parallel to the argument that operates in the ethical domain in which any justification for ethics can only come from the ethical itself – even where prudential considerations converge with ethical concerns, such prudential considerations are strictly irrelevant to any ethical imperative whose force is absolute. The ethical, in this sense, is entirely separate from the realm of the useful (or, to put matters slightly differently, but in terms Michael Sandel can be seen to employ in *What Money Can't Buy*, as value is separate from price). The same point, I would argue, applies to the understanding of wisdom.

Of course, the way of thinking to be found in Newman, and more generally, the idea that knowledge or wisdom might account for themselves, is a way of thinking that goes against almost all of the thinking that drives contemporary university management, policy, and structure. For such thinking is not driven by considerations of knowledge, wisdom or truth, but by a much more utilitarian calculation, and one that also assumes the pure monetization even of utility. This is true whether or not one looks to the contemporary university's emphasis on quantifiable research outputs, national benefit as the measure of research, or the reduction of contemporary university education to what is little more than vocational training, itself measured in terms of the acquisition of discrete 'competencies'. This way of thinking comes from one source and one alone, not from philosophy, nor even from economics, but from a sector of society that, although it is often assumed to drive economics, is actually driven by it, namely,

business and government – the latter being now so tied to the interest of the business sector as to be little more than a servant of it and a mouthpiece for its interests (a situation made even worse by the fact that so many contemporary politicians are themselves personally invested in the business sector both financially and socially).

Leaving aside the questionable nature of the source from which the demand for the accountability of knowledge and wisdom in terms of their utility comes (a source which is both partisan and self-interested), the very idea that there is a limit to the relevance and applicability of utilitarian conceptions invokes the same idea of limit that I have suggested is at issue in the idea of wisdom. Only the fool (and I use this term in that specific sense of one who is 'unwise') would fail to recognise such a limit. The idea that the understanding of limit, whether in this specific case or more generally, is what lies at the heart of wisdom is not, of course, new or unprecedented. It is already suggested by the idea of Socratic ignorance – "I know only that I do not know". If Socrates is in any sense an exemplar of wisdom, and one might argue that the best that can be said is that he is one who seeks the path to wisdom, it is because he is so acutely aware of the limits of his knowledge. In a somewhat a more brutal form, the same point appears in an old joke that the quality of mind most likely to lead to happiness is "stupidity", since if you are stupid, you won't have the wit to know it, and so will not be made unhappy by it – or by any of the other things that your stupidity will prevent you from recognising.

The importance of limit here – of the limit that belongs to wisdom, and the failure to grasp limit that is the essence of foolishness – derives from the simple truth that no matter how much knowledge one possesses there is always more to know – even if it is simply knowledge of the particularities of one's own peculiar or idiosyncratic situation. Yet such limit is not merely epistemic. The ubiquity, indeed inevitability, of failure in practical matters – whether at the governmental level or at the level of personal affairs, provides a different example of the absolute centrality of limit. In all our efforts to control or manage the world, and aspects of it, the fact that any part of the world, let alone the world itself, will always exceed our capacity to manipulate or even represent it means that all such efforts are doomed, in any run other than the short, to fail. Failure is the rule, not the exception, although much of our activity is predicated on the reverse holding true. The fact that we often fail to notice the failing character of our enterprises

and projects is simply a function of the fact that we constantly readjust our measures of success according to the realities of our failures our – like British Rail, who for a time transformed their failure to keep trains running on time by simply redefining the criteria of punctuality to being within ten or twenty minutes of the scheduled timetable. Here failure is avoided by the redefinition of success, and yet failure is thereby also obscured, hidden, denied. Yet failure is the inevitable accompaniment of all human activity. As Samuel Beckett understood, it is not a matter of failing, and then trying until one succeeds, but of failing, failing again, failing better. To recognise the inevitability of failure is to recognise the essentially limited character of human life and activity.

The refusal of such limitation, and the assumption of the ever present possibility of success, is, I would argue one of the key features of modernity. Modern technology, in particular, presents itself as a source of solutions, rather than of problems, and technological development appears as a steady progression – a process of 'continuous improvement', as the language of 'quality management' would have it. Yet as technological systems become more complex, the failure of those systems becomes an increasing problem. The simpler the technology, the more easily can breakdowns within that technology be coped with – the more complex the technology, the more even small failures give rise to difficulties. At the same time, the increasing complexity of technological systems – their very character, in fact, in drawing more and more elements into their sway – also increases the possibilities for failure, often requiring the development of new technologies designed to deal specifically with such possibilities. This is not to say that technology is unsuccessful, but that its success is always faltering, and always brings new problems, new difficulties, in its train. Yet technology hides its own failing character, in this regard, viewing its failures as an indication of the need for greater technological perfection, of a more encompassing grasp of the elements that comprise the technological system, and shifting the focus on the 'problem space' in which it operates, so that technological success is always measured with respect to just those aspects in relation to which technology is successful, while neglecting or ignoring those aspects in relation to which it fails. Albert Camus was a keen observer of this aspect of modernity, or what he termed the 'European', contrasting it with the Greek:

> Greek thought always took its stand upon the idea of limit. It carried nothing to extremes, neither religion nor reason, because it denied nothing, neither reason nor religion. It gave everything its share, balancing

light with shade. Our Europe, on the contrary, eager for the conquest of totality, is the daughter of excess. It denies beauty, as it denies everything it does not extol. And, although in diverse ways, it extols only one thing: the future empire of reason. In its madness it pushes back the eternal limits, and at once dark Furies swoop down upon it to destroy. Nemesis is watching, goddess of moderation, not of vengeance. All those who go beyond the limit are by her pitilessly chastised… It is by acknowledging our ignorance, refusing to be fanatics, recognizing the boundaries of man and the world, through the faces we love, in short, through beauty, that we shall rejoin the Greeks.

The inability to grasp limit is, for Camus, at its most essential in its inability to recognise beauty, which means to recognise the transient, the vulnerable and the fragile as that which is nevertheless the most worthy – the failure properly to grasp the nature of the human, the failure to grasp and to attend to love and to beauty.

Limit is most often understood as a negativity, yet for Camus it is the opposite: it is the very source of positivity, since it is the source of that which is valuable. Limit is that which allows things to appear as salient in the same way that the wall constitutes the room at the same time that it also delimits it. In this sense, limit is not that, to quote Heidegger, at which something stops, but rather "that from which it begins its unfolding". Limit is constitutive rather than merely restrictive. This is as true of the human propensity to failure as it is of fragility and beauty. Wisdom is not merely a matter of an understanding of limit, then, but of an understanding that recognises its productivity.

Inasmuch as education can indeed be understood as a matter of the getting of wisdom, so it is thus also about coming to an understanding of limit. In this respect, Newman's own emphasis on knowledge, even when taken as tied to wisdom, is perhaps misleading. If education, the getting of wisdom, is what the university aims at, then it cannot be an education that consists in the mere accumulation of knowledge. Knowledge as simply a body of things known – of 'information' or 'facts' – is truly useless. It is the recognition of this point that might be said to underpin the widespread idea of wisdom as a certain sort of practical expertise – so that wisdom is what is needed if theoretical knowledge is to be given application, if it is indeed to be useful. This is a way of thinking of wisdom that is supported by some of Aristotle's comments regarding *phronesis*, and it is also an idea present, as I also noted earlier, in some

contemporary appropriations of the idea of wisdom, notably that of Hubert Dreyfus. This way of thinking of wisdom might, however, be said to suggest a different conception of wisdom than that which I have emphasised in terms of the focus on limit. Rather than taking wisdom to be centred on limit, wisdom in this sense should rather be construed as a form of positive expertise – as the sort of practical understanding that enables the genuine exercise of skill and expertise in a specific field, domain, or art. One might worry that such a conception of wisdom as tied to specific forms of practical expertise turns wisdom into a generic term for what are actually different modes of practical skill that are valuable, not necessarily in themselves, but because of their practical utility – as the skills of an experienced carpenter or financial advisor are valuable, not in themselves, because of the improvements they can bring to our lives. It might also be taken as a sense of wisdom that transforms wisdom into little more than *prudence* (itself a not uncommon translation of *phronesis*), and so as essentially geared towards practical concerns that are nevertheless founded independently of it.

These are legitimate worries that ought indeed caution us against any reduction of wisdom to mere practical expertise. Yet independently of such considerations, it seems to me that there are other reasons for taking the idea of limit still to be a key idea in the notion of wisdom. I would argue, first, that even with respect to forms of practical understanding that operate in relation to a specific field, domain, or art, those forms of understanding cannot consist simply in concatenations of otherwise discrete capacities or competencies. Instead, they must be properly unified capacities that operate appropriately in relation to the entirety of the field, domain or art in question – it is this capacity to operate in a unified fashion that marks such understanding off as genuinely an instance of practical wisdom. As it is indeed oriented towards that field of expertise as a whole, so any such wisdom or expertise must also possess a genuine grasp of its own boundaries. There may be a question as to how those limits are indeed grasped, but the mastery of the field at issue can be viewed as a mastery constituted through a mastery of the field or art as it arises within those limits (notice how this conception of expertise is at odds with the competency approach that is so widespread and that itself has little or no basis in any empirical or theoretical understanding of expertise). On these grounds alone, then, even an account of wisdom as a matter of practical expertise need not be inconsistent with an account of wisdom as based in an understanding of

limit. Moreover, even if it were allowed that this is one sense of wisdom, the fact that there is such a sense would not rule out the idea of a more basic sense of wisdom of the sort associated with the idea of a fundamental sense of limit that encompasses all our activities – a sense of wisdom that is not tied to any particular field, domain or art, and rather relates to the mode of our being in the world as human or, if it is to be said to be tied to some art, a sense of wisdom as tied to the 'art of living'.

Here the idea of wisdom as a fundamental capacity for the governance of one's life and activities as a whole through a grasp of the proper limits of that life, and the activities associated with it, connects with another idea that, while not always associated with wisdom, is very often associated with the idea of the university – the idea of *critique*, and together with this also, in terms that are more commonly associated with wisdom, the idea of the commitment to truth.

In pursuit of this idea, let me return once again to Smith. It is sometimes pointed out that what Adam Smith argues against in the *Wealth of Nations* is the imperialistic mercantilism exemplified by the developing British Empire as well as by the Dutch. Such mercantilism was associated with the centralised governmental control of markets and trade in the interests of the nation-state. In opposition to such mercantilism, Smith argued for a more open and diverse economic systems – and with it a more diverse and open social and economic system also. It is the insistence on diversity and openness that seem to me to lie at the heart of Smith's emphasis on the market and the importance of competition. Allied to this for Smith, was also the idea that the virtues that underpinned a healthy economy and society were not those of consumption and the satisfaction of desire, but rather of frugality and industry – of care in the proper use of resources as well as a commitment to real achievement.

Although he does not do so himself (his own views on higher education being very much shaped by the particularities of his own circumstances and of the universities of his time), Smith's emphasis on diversity and openness in economic systems can be applied to the enterprise of knowledge, of education, and so also to the understanding of wisdom as tied to limit. There is a strong tendency for knowledge to become monopolistic. This is something that the philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn discusses.

It is part of what is at issue in the idea of the paradigmatic structure of science – or of what Kuhn calls "normal science". For Kuhn, and more radically for Feyerabend, and later for Rorty, the key task is to maintain the diversity and openness of science, and this can only be done by taking positive steps to encourage dissenting views, to ensure a multiplicity of approaches, and to counter the tendency towards scientific monocultures.

In essence, this same idea can also be seen in the work of J. S. Mill, himself partly an inheritor of some of Smith's ideas, and especially in his essay *On Liberty* (Mill is also a strong champion, incidentally, of the idea that the project of the university cannot be pursued on the basis of any instrumentalism geared to profit). As Mill puts it, the attempt to constrain ideas can only have the effect of constraining and distorting the search for knowledge and for truth. Hence the importance of freedom of ideas and expression, and tied to this also, of freedom to choose one's own way of life (with the important caveat that it should not unreasonably constrain the freedom of others to so choose). Mill's argument, like that of Kuhn, can be seen to be based on the idea of the fallibility of claims to know, or better, on a recognition of the limits within which knowledge is itself constituted. In the University this emphasis on diversity and openness has a number of obvious consequences. One is the importance of ensuring the retention, as far as possible, of a breadth of disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches.

Even if one stops short of the epistemological anarchism that Feyerabend recommended, some degree of methodological and theoretical diversity is essential. What one must not do is to try to impose the equivalent of the mercantilist system in research and higher education – to centralise control of our epistemic enterprises and to impose systems of tariffs that will stifle the free flow of the market of ideas. It is not just a form of university-directed mercantilism that is the problem here, but any form of interventionism that seeks to second-guess the way knowledge will develop, or that thinks it can direct knowledge in general in ways that will gear it to national or extra-epistemic interests. Whether mercantilist or communist, such epistemic interventionist must always fail. In the Soviet Union, Lysenkoism was the most spectacular example of the folly of such an approach, but sadly Lysenkoism remains alive and well today, for it

consists in little more than the familiar idea, widespread in contemporary Anglo-Saxon societies, that one should align scientific research, not with *scientific* interests, but with perceived *national* interests (which are often, of course, simply reflections of the personal interests and prejudices of those in power – and typically, in the current climate, those interests and prejudices are identical with those of *business*, usually big business). Not only does this depend on the valuing of knowledge for its instrumental usefulness, but also on the notion that the pursuit of knowledge is something that can itself be deployed and directed instrumentally. Once again, what we see here is a failure to understand the proper limits within which the pursuit of knowledge itself operates, and so an instance of the very *hubris* – a hubris that is tied to the desire for power and control – that Camus identifies as characteristic of modernity.

Smith emphasised the need for competition in the economic realm, a competition regulated by the market. In the world of ideas this idea of competition is often assumed to translate into competition for funding or students, but in fact it can only mean competition for truth, and allied to that, competition for the honour and recognition that goes with the achievement of truth. This is the real currency that drives the enterprise of knowledge. To some extent, I think this can be connected with Smith's emphasis on the importance of frugality and industry. Smith's focus on these ideas is partly based on the moral character associated with such qualities, but we might also say that it involves the valuing of the work of production, of making, which is why I talked about the value of achievement. This is especially important when it comes to knowledge. Sometimes, of course, a deep commitment to some extra-epistemic value – the relief of suffering, for instance – will drive an individual's pursuit of a scientific project or career. But such extra-epistemic values are not always present, nor as they always operative in motivating and sustaining scientific pursuits.

In a university or higher education setting, this ought to mean that a key objective should be the formation and sustenance of epistemic communities that will embody and so also support the qualities of diversity and openness, and genuine commitment to epistemic excellence, that are essential to successful epistemic work and production – what we might think of as communities that are themselves oriented towards wisdom as the primary concern. This must apply as much to teaching, at least, in Newman's

terms, to any teaching that is not merely about the inculcation of technical skill or mere informational mastery, as it does to research.

Such a view of the nature of the educational communities that ought to constitute universities can be seen to be suggested by Adam Smith's own preferred form of economic, political and social order. Smith famously says, and the passage has become so often-quoted and misquoted that its original meaning has been almost entirely obscured, that we cannot rely on the beneficence of economic actors to ensure own welfare. That is certainly true; we cannot *rely* on it – which is not to say that it might not still have a role to play. But the possibility of economic activity itself depends, as Smith emphasised, on the prior commitment of all of us to a moral system to which not only are we already given over in virtue of relations of sympathy, but in which we can and do rely upon others to be, for instance, trustworthy and truthful. Moreover this moral order can itself be seen to embody the same sense of limit that underpins the idea of wisdom, since it depends on the idea of both the interdependence of human live, its essential relationality, and also the character of such life as always operating in a way that is delimited by the actions, concerns, and needs of others, and by our own essential fragility and fallibility. In this sense the moral life, which must also be a life grounded in a certain *human* wisdom, is a life that always rests on the recognition of essential human limitation – and so on the need for attentiveness and responsiveness to the particularities of our situation as the only basis for actions. One of the lessons Smith teaches – a lesson that is underlined by the various cries in which we now find ourselves – is that the economic order is not independent of the moral order that underpins human life as such. When that moral order breaks down, when wisdom is lost, then so too does the economic and social order also begin to disintegrate. This is why Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is not to be construed as a work that is separate from his *Inquiry into the Wealth of Nations,* but as the essential propaedeutic to it.

It is perhaps worth noting, once again, the way in which the idea of limit appears once again here – the moral order is itself based in a recognition of our own limited capacity, and in a sense of the way in which our own existence is interdependent with that of others. In this respect, the enterprise of knowledge or wisdom is itself based on an ethical order that enshrines basic principles of trust and fairness, and does so because

of the way these principles are themselves tied to an understanding of the limits within which human life and activity operate. One of the consequences of this in the university is that it ought not only to lead to a different conception of teaching and research, but also a different mode of organisation and management – to one that is decentralised, more flexible, and more efficient, since it will not depend on the vain attempt to 'manage' from above through systems of coercion and control, but will rather operate through the internalisation of values and commitments that are themselves derived from the very activities that lie at the heart of the University's existence and that are integral to its operation. It will operate through the internalisation of wisdom in its very structures as well as in those who take responsibility for the leadership and management of the instituion. Significantly, this means the relinquishing of a certain conception of what leadership and management might be, and associated with that, a recognition of the way in which critique and truth must indeed stand at the core of university life.

The commitment to critique, and through critique to truth (since without truth there can be no critique), as central to wisdom derives directly from an understanding of wisdom as tied to limit and the recognition of limit. But it is worth exploring this commitment to critique and truth more closely – in particular, through the way in which it can be understood in terms of an idea that appears in the late work of Michel Foucault. In his seminar on *Fearless Speech* (see Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson, Los Angeles: semiotext(e), 2001), Michel Foucault develops a genealogy of the practice of truth-telling, *parrhesia*, and the associated questions that surround this practice. Foucault says at the end of these lectures that:

…the problematization of truth which characterizes both the end of Presocratic philosophy and the beginning of the kind of philosophy which is still ours today… has two sides, two major aspects. One side is concerned with ensuring that the process of reasoning is correct in determining whether a statement is true (or concern itself with our ability to gain access to the truth). And the other side is concerned with the question: what is the importance for the individual and for the society of telling the truth, of knowing the truth, of having people who tell the truth, as well as knowing how to recognize them. With that side which is concerned with determining how to ensure that a statement is true we have the roots of the great tradition in Western philosophy which I would like to call the "analytics of truth". And on the other side, concerned with the question of the importance of telling the truth, knowing who is able to tell the

truth, and knowing why we should tell the truth, we have the roots of what we could call the "critical" tradition in the West".

It is this critical tradition that seems to me to lie, not only at the heart of the idea of the university, so that we might say that the university is based on the idea of parrhesia, truth-telling, as a discipline and practice, but also at the heart of the idea of wisdom as I have outlined it here. Of course, in focussing on *parrhesia* I am focussing of wisdom as associated with that particular form of action that is speech, but this is an especially crucial mode of wisdom in the university setting. Such parrhesia is, it seems to me, something exhibited in a pre-eminent way by Socrates, even when he seems to speak in ways that are imprudent or unwise – as at his famous trial before the Athenian Assembly. Significantly, the parrhesiast about whom Foucault talks may not always appear as careful or mild, since the parrhesiast is above all a critic – one prepared to challenge, to be a trouble-maker, even, when that is needed.

If the idea of critique that is at issue here seems to jar with some of our traditional assumptions concerning wisdom then perhaps that only shows that we have not been sufficiently critical in our engagement with the idea of wisdom itself. Moreover, as I noted earlier, critique is itself bound up with the idea of truth, ands the lover of wisdom is also a lover of truth. Truth and wisdom are themselves bound together, and this is made especially clear through an understanding of the essential relation of wisdom to limit. Moreover, if we take wisdom to have a central role in the university, then this must also bring wisdom into close connection with critique, since the idea that critique is central to the life of the university is one that is certainly well-founded within our own tradition. Even if we think of the university as based around knowledge, then such knowledge itself rests of a practice of truth-telling, and on the discipline this requires. In this regard, what is most distressing about the situation of the contemporary university is the threat to this critical tradition. As Terry Eagleton writes:

What we have witnessed in our own time is the death of universities as centres of critique. Since Margaret Thatcher, the role of academia has been to service the status quo, not challenge it in the name of justice, tradition, imagination, human welfare, the free play of the mind or alternative visions of the future. We will not change this simply by increasing state funding of the humanities as opposed to slashing it to nothing. We will change it by insisting that a critical reflection on human values and principles should be

central to everything that goes on in universities, not just to the study of Rembrandt or Rimbaud (Terry Eagleton, 'The Death of Universities', *The Guardian* 18 Dec, 2010, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/dec/17/death-universities-malaise-tuition-fees).

Hannah Arendt says that truth has always been feared by tyrants, and the reason is, she says, that truth itself has something tyrannical about it: truth demands our acquiescence; it does not allow us to choose. Wisdom lies in respecting the power that belongs to truth – a power over which we can exercise no control. In this respect, truth is not itself democratic, and yet, precisely because truth tolerates no tyranny but its own, truth is also a powerful force for democratisation – indeed, the freedom demanded by truth, which is freedom *for* the truth and also for the human and the humane (as the final few pages of Orwell's 1984 demonstrate) is very closely related to the sort of freedom that Smith argues underpins the market and is manifest in the democratic polity he associates with it. In this respect, the threat to the critical tradition is also a threat to the very structures that underpin the wealth about which contemporary politicians, business and economists so often speak, and of which Smith talks in *The Wealth of Nations*. What I have set out here, then, is not just an account of wisdom within the context of higher education, but of wisdom as it applies within a *society*. The society at issue is one that is founded upon a conception of its own limit – a limit that has its end in truth. A limit that also has its end in the human. A limit that belongs essentially to wisdom itself.