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Part 1

Reflections on core values
Autonomy: A practice serving a purpose

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Among the many relevant themes that Bert van der Zwaan addresses in his book *Higher Education in 2040* are ‘old and new core values’ (pp. 185-194). He rightly notes that values are important for an organization’s identity as well as for its inner coherence and external legitimacy. He predicts that universities will probably need them more than they used to. A return to old values and romantic pleas for restoration are no real options. Far too much has changed. A new balance must be struck between independence and interdependence of university and society. Universities ought to show more courage in making their own policy choices while at the same time taking much more seriously what they could and should contribute to society. I would put this as follows: less compliance, more service. It is this apparent paradox that I will elaborate upon in this essay: autonomous universities truly serving society.

In 1988, at the 900th anniversary of the University of Bologna, hundreds of rectors signed the *Magna Charta Universitatum*. Against the backdrop of centuries of European universities and in view of the growing cooperation between all European nations and the role of universities in an increasingly international society, they wanted to demonstrate the core principles of what a university should be. Utrecht University was among the very first to sign the document. The signature was put by Hans van Ginkel, one of Bert van der Zwaan’s great predecessors as Rector Magnificus. As a matter of fact, van Ginkel had been among the eight drafters of the declaration. It may strike today’s readers that the text uses pretty stately language to convey rather up-to-date ideas and convictions. Universities are portrayed as centres of culture, knowledge, and research to serve society. This is to
be done by teaching younger generations, but it also requires considerable investment in continuing education. As a main feature of education and training, it is stated that universities must teach respect for ‘the great harmonies of their natural environment and of life itself’.

To enable universities to play their part, the declaration proclaims four fundamental principles on which the mission of universities should be based. The first of these is about independence: ‘To meet the needs of the world around [the university], its research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power’. Immediately preceding this statement, the university is described as an autonomous cultural institution at the heart of societies that for reasons of historical tradition and geography are organized in different ways. It seems to me that the very wording of this first principle (‘morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power’) and the way it is wrapped in a statement of purpose (‘to meet the needs of the world around it’) as well as a description of international diversity (‘societies differently organized because of geography and historical heritage’) reveals the considerable wisdom on the part of the drafters. They refrained from making unilateral, complacent statements on the university but rather made it crystal clear that universities are embedded institutions. They are not self-serving entities but exist in a social setting, for the benefit of their particular environment. The university must be independent for a reason, in order to enable it to do what it is supposed to be doing and to best serve those whom it is supposed to be serving.

It is the aim of the present paper to explore the social quality of autonomy as well as its uses, and the challenges that come with it. Before doing so, I would like to point out that the very concept of autonomy refers to the practice of self-rule in lawmaking and decision-making. A country or an institution is autonomous if it sets its own rules and can determine its own future. This shows that autonomy implies a clear responsibility, namely to decide which rules and plans the institution needs and how to arrive at
them. Autonomy refers to an activity, to nimble self-rule rather than to the condition of those who are being spared the demands and directives of others.

I promised to explore the social quality of autonomy. First I will discuss how autonomy is embedded in a social setting — or rather how university autonomy depends on a kind of social contract. The next question is: whose autonomy are we talking about exactly in the case of universities? This is about agency and ownership inside the institution. And finally — and most importantly — I will discuss the uses of autonomy. How can we discern that universities are practicing autonomy, and to whose benefit is it?

The great successes of universities have a downside. They are wanted. It is established opinion that higher learning and scientific research are the champions of modern civilization. They are seen as essential engines of development, fertile grounds for new generations of professionals, and indispensable providers of smart solutions to future questions. No wonder they are in high demand. No wonder universities grow in number and in size. No wonder external stakeholders hold universities in such high esteem, and no wonder they are keen to make universities yield the fruits of their preference. Governments, employers, product developers, students, and their families — they all clearly want something from the university that suits them. It is immediately clear that stakeholders’ demands and preferences hold universities in check. The inevitable web of relations between a university and its stakeholders, supporters, and owners influences the university. These relations are governed by laws and contracts but are by no means confined to such formal arrangements. In many cases, the social setting as expressed by mutual expectations and commitments is much more influential than those formal frames. An institution that is granted full autonomy by law may nevertheless be bound and steered to a high degree by the dynamics of economic realities, political preferences, business priorities, or social diversity.

Autonomy is the condition sine qua non of the academy. How could we possibly do what we are supposed to be doing if we do
not have the space or the freedom to inquire, to teach, and to criticize or to approve? Stakeholders — be they citizens; governments; political, religious or ethnic groups; businesses; or private owners — should realize that without autonomy, universities cannot properly function and deliver what they should deliver. Autonomy must be granted. And in reverse, universities should realize that they are partners in the social contract. But autonomy doesn’t fall from heaven as a formal, legal privilege. And it is not carved in stone, once and for all. The social setting of higher education is a dynamic one, changing over time and defined by the power, interests, and trust of a good number of stakeholders. It is from these dynamics that a social contract, on which autonomy depends, emerges. So universities should fully, courageously, and continuously engage with all relevant stakeholders to update and uphold this contract.

Bert van der Zwaan’s book is, among other things, an interesting reflection of his sabbatical readings. On page 102, he refers to Helga Nowotny’s The Cunning of Uncertainty (2016). She explored the many faces of uncertainty, in particular its role in science and how to cope with it. Bert van der Zwaan refers to the book as an argument for scholarship as a pre-eminently uncertain process. He then concludes that:

the university needs to be restructured completely: not only by providing different incentives, but by looking completely differently at what and who should steer the process of teaching and research. This unequivocally means that there should be more autonomy for individual lecturers and researchers, because it is there in particular that freedom and uncertainty play a role in achieving academic progress. (p. 102)

He goes on to cite Ronald Barnett’s plea in Being a University (2011) for imaginative thinking about the university of the future beyond the entrepreneurial or developmental types: ‘Barnett’s “liquid university” could be an intermediary phase on the way to the university of the future’ (p. 102). It may be that Bert van
der Zwaan is more convinced by the concept of the ‘liquid university’ than Barnett himself, who finds this concept too risky and anarchic to really go for it. Whatever the case may be, they both make a valid point. The autonomy of individual teachers and researchers should be guaranteed if the claim for university autonomy is to have real meaning. After all, the primary processes of the academy — teaching/learning and research — are in their hands. And the responsibility that comes with it is part of their professional habitus. So university autonomy is about the university as an institution in all its parts. Thus autonomy always is relative autonomy. Both independence and constraint operate at a variety of levels: at the institutional leadership level as well as in the workplace, and at a good number of intermediate levels. This may seem a truism. Yet it is not rare that university leaders confidently profess their institution’s autonomous position while academics in the workplace do not feel free at all to make crucial choices about programming and prioritizing. This is clearly not the way it should be. Values are crucial for an institution’s identity as well as for its inner coherence. They cannot and should not reside with leadership alone. They must be discussed, defined, and lived to become truly shared values.

Universities set their own rules and enjoy a high degree of independence, but for what purpose? The Magna Charta Universitatum of 1988 clearly and simply states: ‘to meet the needs of the world around the university’. Autonomy is a practice serving a purpose, a means to an end. But which end, or rather, ends? What are ‘the needs of the world’? To what purpose do universities use their self-rule? To achieve what? Autonomy is little more than an enabler, offering freedoms and opportunities. It is the use of autonomy that counts. Such a use could be defining the mission and profile of your institution and identifying the community you want to serve. If done right, an appropriate use of autonomy will feed back into the social contract on which it is based. At this point, I see quite a challenge. Universities are wont to have very similar ideals about what a university is for, not just in theory but also in actual practice. The main risk is that a tendency to please,
going with fashionable and powerful trends and stakeholders while siding with established interests and serving high achievers, will not be good enough for higher education. When comparing university strategies and profiles, one observes a high degree of uniformity and a low degree of differentiation, a high degree of imitation and very little difference. This is usually attributed to a couple of strong forces: the attractions of powerful examples (the so-called world-class university of international rankings), the traditional heritage of academic self-understanding, and, last but not least, the absence of direct rewards for being different. Some observers compare the university to animals or plants responding to their eco-system: it comes as no surprise that they respond in the same way if that way is successful. Yet this is not the full story. I shall try to explain why.

Universities are a worldwide success. As a general statement, this is true. It does not, however, mean that everywhere and at all times, everyone applauds them for their achievements. The opposite is true. There is substantial criticism from various sides and perspectives. Some find universities elitist and arrogant, others see them as quasi-corporations driven by money and moulded to the style and interests of the business world. Some reproach them for being inefficient, others for being self-serving. Their traditional role as guardians and promoters of the public good has lost much of its appeal. Such criticism should not be ignored. Among the many reasons for this criticism, the erosion of trust stands out. If academia can no more be trusted, the social contract breaks apart. This will first lead to pressure on funding arrangements, limitations to self-rule, and additional controls and audits, to be followed by the erosion of political support and a falling out of grace with donors. The usual answer to critical voices is a repetition ad nauseam of the worldwide success story, but this is not good enough. Even if that story could convince critics that the best students are receiving an excellent education, highly qualified researchers are producing ever-growing numbers of very good research results, and academic peers are quite satisfied with the quality of it all, even then this narrative
would not be an answer to the criticism voiced. What about all the other students outside the statistical margins of ‘excellence’? How to explain the high percentages of dropouts and unemployed graduates? Why is it that large parts of the electorate think that universities are not serving them? How is it that those infamous rankings measure international excellence but fail to gauge local or national benefits? Who can justify the spending of tax contributions by the many on benefits for the few?

If the social contract that grants self-rule to academia is to remain intact, its trust base must be considerably widened and strengthened. ‘To meet the needs of the world’ requires a practice of autonomy geared towards a diverse set of uses and purposes and a keen responsiveness to broader sets of stakeholders than the usual suspects. This brings us back to the apparent paradox: less compliance, more service. Or to put it another way: less obedience to fashions and funders, and more differentiation and variety, please. Which is, if I have understood it well, a very short summary of Bert’s book.

Bibliography