Discourses on Culture

Editor-in-chief: **Iga Maria Lehman**

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Preface

The University in the World of Spiritual Pursuits Amid Technological Interventions

The role of higher education in society has continually shifted between serving the public good and fulfilling private interests, with societal forces playing a decisive role in shaping this dynamic. Universities have always responded to the demands society makes of them from their outset. Early institutions in the 10th and 11th centuries were required to focus on medicine and canon and civil law. In the late 12th century the university of Paris was famous as a center of theological learning. The upheavals brought about by the Reformation of the 16th century affected the universities of Europe in different ways, with universities siding with either traditional Catholic teachings or the new interest in science that the Reformation brought with it. Halle university, founded in 1694, was one of the first to renounce religious orthodoxy of any kind and instead offered

teaching which pursued rational and objective intellectual inquiry. So by the end of the 18th century there was a focus on academic practices which emphasized research, laboratory experimentation and rigorous examination. Consequently, sciences like physics, chemistry, biology and engineering featured in university curricula, and by the early 20th century disciplines such as economics, political science, psychology and sociology were also introduced. Modern languages and their literatures replaced the teaching of the traditional study of Latin and Greek.

However, these trends in European higher education were not uniformly adopted. In the 19th century, for example, only some universities became secularized and eventually state-financed, most notably in Italy, France and Spain. This created a patchwork of direct links between higher education institutions and the societies that they served, which remains to this day. This in turn led to a lack of homogeneity with regards to the fundamental purpose of higher education. In the UK, for instance, universities emerged to meet evolving societal needs from religious instruction in medieval institutions like Oxford and Cambridge to broader access to education in the 19th century, and eventually to supplying skilled labor for an industrial economy. However, this utilitarian view, emphasizing the economic and vocational functions of universities, is challenged by others who champion the importance of a more humanistic rationale. Cardinal Newman in *The Idea of a University* (1976) famously argued that universities should be devoted to the pursuit of universal knowledge, not merely vocational training.

This dichotomy is evident in the development of higher education in other national contexts. In Poland, the founding of the Jagiellonian University in 1364 by King Casimir III was initially motivated by the need to educate administrators and clergy, reflecting both state and church interests. During the communist era (1945–1989), Polish universities were heavily oriented toward serving state needs, particularly in science and technology, as part of a centrally planned economy (Kwiek, 2001). Since the fall of communism, however, the system has undergone significant marketization, reflecting a shift toward the production of competitive, globally mobile graduates. Yet, as Lenart in this volume argues through his case study of the University of Opole, this transition not only involved economic restructuring but also introduced new existential challenges,

including the marginalization of the humanities and the rise of technological determinism, which threatened to displace the ethical and spiritual missions of universities.

In the United States, the development of higher education has similarly oscillated between public service and privatized benefits. The Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890, which created land-grant universities, exemplified a commitment to public purpose by promoting access to practical education in agriculture and engineering. Yet, in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, rising tuition fees and student debt have prompted critiques that U.S. higher education increasingly operates as a private investment rather than a public good (Labaree, 1997). Despite this, many institutions still uphold missions of civic engagement, diversity, and social responsibility, indicating that the public/private dichotomy remains complex and contested.

Today this ultimate purpose of higher education is being determined by rapid developments in information technology and the requirement to provide the knowledge and skills the future workforce needs to participate fully in the new global, rather than national economy. In the field of academia, artificial intelligence, neurotechnology, and digital education tools have redefined the way knowledge is researched, created and communicated, with an emphasis on functionality, immediacy, and measurable outcomes. Many view this shift as worrying, arguing that universities have begun to focus on economic goals and market-oriented values, reducing its fundamental purpose to that of a transactional process rather than a transformative one (Bylsma, 2015). As The World Economic Forum points out in their report on higher education (Feb. 2022), we are implementing a system that "certifies knowledge rather than nurtures learning" and argues that this knowledge is "easily-outdated".

Universities today face a wide range of complex, and at times existential, challenges. These include financial pressures related to funding models, the imperative to attract both domestic and international students, and increasing competition from institutions around the world. They must also keep pace with rapid technological change, not only in the subjects they teach but in how courses are designed and delivered. This reflects what might be called

the 'public' dimension of higher education: the question of what universities can do for society.

Simultaniously, there is growing attention to the 'private' dimension: what university can do for the individual. Here, too, we find existential concerns. A recent *eCampus News* article highlighted that "across campuses worldwide, students are grappling with high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression". These challenges, the article notes, stem from "the demands of academic rigor, coupled with societal pressures and personal responsibilities". The authors emphasize the urgent need for universities to acknowledge these pressures and to foster a more "supportive and inclusive campus culture". *ECampus News* is a widely read platform that offers information and insights aimed at helping higher education leaders transform their institutions. The site reaches more than 300,000 unique visitors monthly, including over 250,000 registered members, reflecting the scale and urgency of the issues it reports on.

This thematic issue argues that participation in higher education needs to be a holistic experience in which academic and vocational aspects are complemented by cultural, ethical, and spiritual considerations. It questions the current, dominant idea that the fundamental role of universities today is to provide "knowledge for the sake of serving society and knowledge for the sake of serving social demands" (Guttmann, 1987, p. 188). The issue aims to pose the question: "Can and should universities reset the balance and provide spaces for existential reflection, ethical discourse, and increased opportunities for humanistic scholarship?".

A major challenge in this debate is the growing presence and use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools like ChatGPT within academic practice. AI offers both functional benefits and profound epistemological challenges. For example, a tool like ChatGPT is capable of producing grammatically coherent and structurally well-organized academic texts, and yet it lacks the rhetorical and dialogical depth and nuance found in purely human-authored work. For instance, research comparing AI-generated and student essays finds that ChatGPT relies more heavily on rigid lexical bundles and abstract phrasing, displaying lower levels of authorial voice, personal engagement, and rhetorical nuance (Jiang & Hyland, 2025a, 2025b, 2024). This distinction is not merely stylistic; the reduction in

interactional metadiscourse, such as hedges, boosters, attitude markers, and engagement features, signals a mode of communication that, while superficially coherent, lacks the intersubjective resonance necessary for meaningful argumentation. As Jiang and Hyland (2025b) argue, human academic writing is defined by its ability to acknowledge and respond to imagined readers, fostering a dialogic relationship between author and audience. By contrast, ChatGPT--generated texts exhibit what they term "audience blindness", a limitation rooted in the model's statistical, rather than experiential processing of language.

This is just one of the many challenges facing higher education institutions today which have implications for pedagogical practices and perhaps more fundamentally, for the present and future role of such institutions in our societies. If education is increasingly mediated and guided by algorithmic considerations, how do we preserve the distinctiveness of human thought, uniqueness and creativity, and where is the space for the intangibles, spirituality and well-being?

This thematic issue not only reaffirms the need for the spiritual and existential dimensions of academic life but places them in direct conversation with the current realities of the digital revolution. As contributors like Konik, Ruczaj, and Oviedo suggest, recovering the human element, whether through art, theology, or interdisciplinary reflection, is not nostalgic but necessary. It offers a path forward where universities resist becoming dispensers of certification of specific learning outcomes and instead cultivate holistic, ethical and dialogically attuned scholars.

These questions build directly on the themes explored in issue 21 of this journal, "Spirituality in Scholarship", which foregrounded the exclusion of spiritual perspectives from many of today's higher education programs. That volume challenged the epistemological dominance of positivism and offered instead a model of scholarship that embraces reflexivity, affect, identity, and meaning. As Lehman and Canagarajah noted in their co-authored preface, "Doing and reporting research in global academia, located in the Anglophone 'centre', often excludes considerations of the role of diversity and spirituality in scholarship" (p. 9, 2024). Their call was taken up in Shepard Wong's (2024) seminal article "Scholars as spiritual beings", which articulated five trajectories through which spirituality and scholarship intersect: vertical,

outward, horizontal, inward, and multidimensional. These frameworks helped conceptualize spirituality not as a supplemental concern but as a central mode of scholarly inquiry and identity formation.

The current volume extends and deepens this inquiry by examining the university itself as a site where technological, institutional, and spiritual forces contend. The contributions reflect a broad spectrum of disciplinary perspectives from philosophy and theology to cultural studies and aesthetics, and point to the urgent need for higher education to resist reductive paradigms and strive to provide society with knowledgeable and skilled citizens who are also able to contribute to their communities in a more holistic way.

The volume opens with epistemological and anthropological inquiries that seek to expand the foundations of human understanding. Alexandru Casian explores the philosophical and anthropological development of *Einfühlung* ("feeling into"), tracing its intellectual lineage from Herder to Franz Boas. He argues that this overlooked concept deepens our understanding of culture, empathy, and personal identity, offering a valuable epistemological tool for interdisciplinary scholarship.

Building on this exploration of cultural and humanistic frameworks, Antony Hoyte-West provides a comparative study of online postgraduate humanities education at Scotland's ancient universities. His findings show how these institutions are navigating the digital shift while maintaining their humanistic roots, suggesting that adaptation and tradition need not be at odds, and that digitalization can support renewal rather than decline.

Continuing this focus on cultural literacy and public engagement, Essam Eid Abu Gharbiah turns to the visual language of poetic graffiti in Saudi Arabia's "Ithra" Library. His cultural reading of Arabic inscriptions demonstrates how aesthetic literacy can animate public spaces with intellectual and spiritual resonance, reframing libraries as sites of cultural vitality.

Shifting toward the intersection of theology, secularization, and institutional identity, Lluís Oviedo makes a compelling case for reintegrating theology into the academic mainstream. He contends that the current crisis in the humanities is inseparable from the decline of spiritual discourse, and argues that theology,

far from being dogmatic, provides a resilient ethical and existential framework for modern academia.

In a complementary reflection, Mirosław Lenart examines the evolution of the University of Opole in post-communist Poland as a microcosm of broader academic transformations. He warns that while ideological constraints may have been lifted, technological determinism and market forces now pose new existential risks. His call is for universities to reclaim their ethical, interdisciplinary, and humanistic missions before becoming indistinguishable from corporate research centres.

The theme of technology and human creativity is then taken up by Roman Konik, who poses the provocative question: must art be created by humans? Arguing that AI lacks the intentionality and symbolic depth of human expression, Konik defends the enduring significance of the human spirit in authentic artistic creation.

Delving deeper into the dialogue between science and spirituality, Stanisław Ruczaj addresses the perceived conflict between theological and cognitive--scientific understandings of Christian faith. Drawing on both Augustine and contemporary theological insights, he proposes a reconciliatory model in which divine grace operates through natural processes, bridging empirical inquiry and spiritual belief.

The volume closes with Antony Hoyte-West's review of Iga Maria Lehman's monograph *Charismatic Leadership in Organizations: The Critique of Texts*. He praises the work for its timely critique of leadership discourse and its contribution to the broader conversation about human agency, institutional authority, and the ideological dimensions of academic language.

Together, these essays explore how the university might once again become a space for the cultivation of the soul as well as the intellect, a forum where spirituality and science, art and algorithm, tradition and innovation can engage in meaningful dialogue. In doing so, this issue extends the project initiated in issue 21, not only to reintegrate spirituality into scholarly discourse but to rethink the institutional and epistemological structures that shape what counts as knowledge in the first place.

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Articles

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Einführung: Tracing the Personalisation of the Herderian Concept of Culture in American Academia

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Abstract: In today's world, the idea of culture has an inherent plural character. The conceptual pluralisation may occur at different levels. We witness a growing

number of cultural manifestations through the complex dynamics between individuals and their multicultural communities. The post-modern human being interacts with cultural artefacts and philosophical notions in an increasingly personalised manner. Franz Boas and Johann Gottfried von Herder are two key figures in the pluralisation and personalisation of the concept of culture through the implicit ideas of *Einfühlung*. Conventionally associated with other philosophers, this complex notion can be traced back to Herder. The idea of "feeling into" creates powerful meanings out of numerous divergences articulated in the individuals and their interaction with the world. By using the historical epistemology approach, significant continuities emerge from anthropological and psychological narratives. German-American transfers involved a meaning metamorphosis in anthropology that expresses the human drive to personal significance and development. Despite being relatively unknown outside German--speaking circles, the concept of *Einfühlung* has continued to evolve and to change cultural representations in contemporary societies.

Keywords: *Einfühlung*, Herder, Boas, culture, personalisation

Introduction

In today's world, the notion of culture replaced many other words such as society, practice or style (Bartosch, 2022). Its tight links with the concept of *Einfühlung* were consolidated by the creator of the contemporary dominant concept of culture, Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803). The need to perceive and analyse other cultures and historical periods influenced the idea of *Einfühlung* (Curtis, 2014). Herder was one of the first philosophers to consciously use the notion of culture in its plural sense. His groundbreaking idea of *Volksgeist* (people's spirit) significantly broadened the interdisciplinary perspective on cultural phenomena (Ackermann, 2016). The German-born American anthropologist, Franz Boas (1858–1942), adapted Herder's notions to twentieth-century realities. With the help of his students, Edward Sapir (1884–1939), Ruth Benedict (1887–1948), Margaret Mead (1901–1978), Alfred Kroeber

(1876–1960) and Alexander Goldenweiser (1880–1940), among many others, he laid the foundations for anthropology in the United States. By planting the seeds for the development of *Einfühlung* as a solid theoretical construct, Herder opened the way to a new conceptualisation of human feelings and individual experiences based on discourses of the psychological self and a growing interest for intersubjective phenomena (Romand, 2015).

Etymologically speaking, the German noun "*Einfühlung*" represents a derivation from the reflexive verb "*einfühlen*" through the substantival suffix "*-ung*". The word "*einfühlen*" is formed from the verb "*fühlen*" (to feel, touch or examine) and the prefix "*ein-*", used to specify direction. By accentuating the idea of "feeling into", the term "*Einfühlung*" conventionally denotes the ability to detect other's emotional states and to identify with them (Mietelski, 2022). Throughout history, this complex concept has accumulated numerous meanings. While Hackl, Märker and Doblmair (2024) define *Einfühlung* as "recognising someone's feelings" (p. 142), Juvekar and Murali (2022) translate it as "aesthetic sympathy" (p. 143). It is in this richness of suggestive meanings that *Einfühlung* stands preeminent among the numerous notions in our contemporary highly psychologised vocabularies. This complex construct acquired new meanings that touch the challenges faced by the contemporary human beings. For example, identity and emotional struggles have important effects on individuals and communities that range from social disequilibria and income inequities to feelings of relative deprivation (Tehranian, 1998).

In the light of the renewed interest for the notion of *Einfühlung* in contemporary science and philosophy (Gallese, 2008), it seems important to trace its evolution. Feeling and experiencing cultural phenomena in a distinct way evokes the old dilemma between human nature and human variation. Shore (2000) notes that anthropologists study the group variation in order to detect biological, social and cultural differentiations depending on numerous anthropological subfields. Anthropology as a discipline celebrates human diversity. However, Shore (2000) argues that the study the human nature and the study of human diversity may sometimes lead to opposite research perspectives. The main aim of this article is to present the notion of *Einfühlung* from a new light and to give a new breath to conventional conceptual genealogies that develop around names of renamed

German philosophers such as Robert Vischer (1847–1933) and Theodore Lipps (1851–1914). By re-examining the Herderian-Boasian notion of culture and its epistemological basis, the often overlooked idea of *Einfühlung* emerges as a central component in contemporary frameworks.

Literature Review

In today's era, the concept of culture became inseparable from the idea of identity and its interiorised dimensions. Our identities are formed through three forms of culture: (1) primary culture—identification with other human beings; (2) secondary culture—language and cosmology, (3) tertiary culture—mediated communication. These three elements of cognition continuously interact to construct our ego identities (Tehranian, 1998). Preston (1966) defines culture as a construct to which the individual reacts and responds in a unique personal way. In American anthropology, the concept of culture plays a special role. The numerous sub-disciplines of American anthropology have allied themselves with almost every existing discipline. From this point of view, the concept of culture stands at crossroads of the debates on trans-disciplinary unification (O'Meara, 1999).

In academic literature, the links between the notions of culture and *Einfühlung* are not always obvious. Given the great variety of translations, its history is difficult to trace (Nowak, 2011). The idea of *Einfühlung* incorporates many meanings that globally turn around the concept of empathy (Juvekar & Murali, 2022). Jakupi (2018), for example, translates it as "to feel as a one" and "walk in another's shoes" (p. 318). According to Montag, Gallinat and Heinz (2008), the German philosopher, Robert Vischer coined this term in 1873. He influenced other major intellectual figures, including Theodore Lipps and, subsequently, Sigmund Freud. Besides the conventional translations of "feeling into" nature, works of art, cultural phenomena or emotional experiences of other cultures and individuals (Nowak, 2011), Matthiesen and Klitmøller (2019) add the definition of "projecting oneself into something else" (p. 184). It seems important to highlight that the kinaesthetic meanings have predominantly German sources (Lanzoni, 2012).

Greatly inspired by Vischer, Theodore Lipps actively promoted the notion of *Einfühlung*. His definition emphasized the idea of an instinctive mimicry of the Other, rather than a simple projection onto an object. He highlighted the importance of empathetic experiences with both inanimate objects and living organisms. Robert Vischer, on the other hand, concentrated his attention on the construction and the expansion of the self by transforming *Einfühlung* into a means of union (Curtis, 2014).

While the majority of the literature attributes the emergence and theoretical consolidation of *Einfühlung* to Robert Vischer (Matthiesen & Klitmøller, 2019) and Theodore Lipps (Pais, 2024), the Herderian legacy is generally overlooked (Curtis, 2014). In the academic literature, the links to Herder, Boas and their notions of culture tend to fade throughout history. Historical epistemology has the potential to fill theoretical gaps. This methodological tool recreates the history of philosophy and of epistemic concepts by mapping the history of scholarly *personae* (Simons, 2023).

Methodology

The complexity of the concept of *Einfühlung* calls for interdisciplinary methodological approaches. Historical epistemology lies at the intersection of the history of science and the history of concepts. Through a unique perspective on the history of scholarly *personae*, this interdisciplinary methodological approach can reveal itself particularly useful in many academic scenarios. Philosophers such as Gaston Bachelard, Léon Brunschvicg and Michel Foucault actively connected considerations of subjectivity and mental constitution with the general perception of science. In addition to trace the evolution of concepts, researchers become able to analyse the scientific mind behind them. In other words, historical epistemology allows a better understanding of the scientific and philosophical self (Simons, 2023).

The principles of historical epistemology do not contradict the Herderian tradition. For Herder, specific concepts and ideas could be examined only in relation to the cultural units of which they were a part (Trigger, 2004).

The concept of culture represents an illustrative example. All the ways to use the term "culture" must acknowledge the original meanings of culture and its true conceptual intensions. Otherwise, this essential notion can become a potentially superficial construct (Bartosch, 2022).

Historical epistemology fuses temporal and spatial boundaries to produce a new picture of knowledge formation. From this perspective, Boasian anthropology recovered the temporal and spatial specificity of cultural events and processes through the development of systems of editorial and rhetorical analysis highly dependent upon European social and psychological conceptions (Kroeber, 1992). The process of psychologisation reinforced the central position of Boasian anthropology. Psychologisation celebrates the human beings and their lives. Focusing only on biological factors, such as genes and neurotransmitters, does not secure the core information that researchers need. The danger of an exclusively biogenetic paradigm is falling into a depsychologising of subjectivity (De Vos, 2011). Franz Boas and his students were aware of these risks and their triggers. The followers of the Boasian tradition examined human behaviours in order to detect imposed structures and conceptions (Preston, 1966).

The links between historical epistemology and psychology are very tight. Simons (2023) argues that historical epistemology can be used "to map a set of psychological traits and virtues that it prescribes to scientists and philosophers" (p. 296) and to produce an interdisciplinary analysis "in terms of a history of a diverse set of *ethea* of the self" (p. 306). The present study does not aim to provide a psychological portray of Herder, Boas and his students. The article looks closely at the historical contexts and epistemological trends that affected their research motivations and interests. As Simons (2023) notes historical epistemology enables the study of how the researchers create an ideal scholarly self.

Analysis

Placing every question in its historical and epistemological context represents an essential research step. Contrary to common beliefs, the concept of *Einfühlung* had a heavy influence not only on Romanticism and pantheism but

also on the twentieth-century artistic and theoretical movements (Curtis, 2014). The influence on the concept of culture produced important continuities. Jaspers (2016) points our attention to the tight theoretical links between the Herderian and the Boasian conceptualisations. Their visions of cultural dynamics have shaped scientific and social representations. Today the concept of culture acts within academia and society as an essential autonomous determinant of individual, group, ethnic and national behaviours (Scupin, 2018).

Historically and epistemologically speaking, the Boasian conceptual frameworks created the foundation of contemporary anthropology. His own intellectual debts to Herder transformed culture into group and individual possessions. Starting from the idea that behaviours are culturally determined, Franz Boas consolidated a highly pluralistic concept of culture in social studies (Webster, 1997).

Herder's Legacy

The notion of *Einfühlung* has its source in the Herderian philosophy and the mystical union between the subject and the object. In his *Treatise on the Origin of Language* (1772) and *This Too a Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity* (1774), Herder started to use *Einfühlung* as a tool to interpret texts, cultures and their complex histories. He heavily influenced many other influential philosophers, such as Friedrich Schelling and Wilhelm Dilthey (Nowak, 2011).

Herder reconceived culture as *Einfühlung*. As a matter of fact, many notions were greatly transformed by his ideas. For example, Herder reconceived the notion of progress through *Bildung*, a formative process of learning from the past. Without promoting absolute and deterministic views, he emphasised the historical continuity of experience and the inheritance of traditions. By arguing against a common standard for the occurrence of progress, Herder insisted on the singularity of each culture and the richness of crosscultural commonalities (Chrostowska, 2021). The pluralisation of the concept of culture was facilitated by a systematic rethinking of the synchronic and diachronic conditions of human learning. The essence of the Herderian

legacy is that all cultures are precious because of their diversity and uniqueness. For him, the notion of culture could not be assimilable into an essentializing, unitary definition. Herder vigorously rejected simplistic views that reduced the meanings of culture down to its abstract contrast with nature (Kroeber, 1992).

Herder's idea of the autonomy of cultures was cognate with Kant's view on the autonomy of the aesthetic. Given the fact that post-Darwinian explanations of differences in human practices and lifestyles became increasingly rooted in biological models, the adoption of the approaches developed by Herder marks an important turn in historical epistemology. By refusing the idea of large--scale, continent-wide forms of human cultures and the conception of historical traditions as simple outcomes, Herder was able to explain major and minor cultural differences that exist among and within societies across the globe (Taylor, 2011).

Herder's project consisted in finding the German vernacularism, purifying it, and restoring the unity to the German nation. He created an organic model of the nation based on unified constructions of not only language, literature, art, and history, but also worldviews (Briggs, 2005). Herder advocated an introspective view on cultural production. "The production of art, as of a human being, was an instant of pleasure, an union between idea and character, between body and spirit" (Herder, 1800/1784, p. 240). The pluralisation of the concept of culture occurred not only through a more detailed examination of historical conditions but also through a reinterpretation of the role of human feelings. For Herder, history had a revolutionary character, and liberation was the *telos* of history. In his view, complex tumultuous feelings became the key to liberation (Voelz, 2021). This specific equation expands the theoretical grounds of the notion of *Einfühlung*. In the analysis of culture, Herder gave a greater importance to emotional aspects than to cognitive ones (Scupin, 2018). Herder elaborated a complex approach for the interpretation of emotional elements and feelings by paying a special attention to the diversity of cultural contexts (Bassi, 2023).

Einfühlung as a Multifaceted Theoretical Lens

"The concept of *Einfühlung*—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say the verb *einfühlen*—is first encountered in the writings of Herder" (Curtis, 2014, p. 360).

This philosopher was the great prophet of the pluralisation and personalisation of culture. The emphasis on the concept of *Einfühlung* and the adjacent processes profoundly marked the way we perceive cultures and the surrounding world. "Our minds feel inward satisfaction, when they not only perceive the balm, which flows from the laws of human nature, but see it spread, and make its way among mankind, even against their wills, form its natural force" (Herder, 1800/1784, p. 446). The idea of inward satisfaction and the links with natural forces creates powerful images and representations. "Herder considered the act of empathizing (*sich-Einfühlen*) as a way of imaginatively evoking the affective situation and perceptions of people in foreign cultures and past epochs to such an extent that their worlds could be adequately discussed" (Curtis, 2014, p. 373).

By conducting a conceptual history study, modelled on Reinhart Koselleck's *Begriffsgeschichte*, Edwards (2013) argues that it was Johann Gottfried von Herder who invented the concept of *Einfühlung* and used it as a scientific method. This multifaceted notion carries aggressive absolutist–relativist disputes. Similarly to the present study, the analysis conducted by Edwards (2003) includes original eighteenth-, nineteenth- and twentieth-century academic texts. The author concluded that conflicting perspectives on human nature and political systems changed the representations and interpretations of the concept of *Einfühlung*. In the United States, this construct was translated as empathy and (re)emerged as a psychological notion that described personal characteristics and that aimed to promote relativist perspectives by eliminating longstanding methodological disputes (Edwards, 2013).

The concept of *Einfühlung* is implicitly present in our representations and imaginaries through the contemporary psychologised vocabularies. Its power remains intact throughout centuries. The psychologised language came to dictate not only our sense of self but also all ranges of interpersonal relations. The romantic, familiar, social and professional spheres received new definitions and meanings from psychological perspectives (Lerner & Rivkin- -Fish, 2021). Edwards (2013) argues that even though most academic literature credits Robert Vischer for creating the term *Einfühlung*, it was Herder who laid the basis for its emergence as term and methodological tool. Commonly translated as empathy, the notion of *Einfühlung* has deeper meanings that reflect

the idea of "feeling into" and that destroy the boundaries between the object and the subject. During the twentieth century, German emigrants brought this concept to the United States and revolutionised the conceptual frameworks of American anthropology and science in general:

> The most general and necessary sense is that of feeling: it is the basis of the rest, and one of the greatest organic preeminences of man. It has conferred on us dexterity, invention, and art; and contributes more perhaps to the formation of our ideas, than we imagine. But how different is this sense, according as it is modified by the way of life, climate, application, exercise, and native irritability of the body (Herder, 1800/1784, p. 446).

Herder's philosophy depicts subjective sensory experiences from a first--person perspective (Mathäs, 2013). The Herderian relativistic views can be found even in his conceptualisation of the idea of feeling. He created long-lasting links between art, cultural phenomena and highly particularistic notions of feeling. "The internal feeling of an existence" (Herder, 1800/1784, p. 254) forms the basis for the interpretation of the surrounding world.

Herder's Einfühlung in Boasian Anthropology

Following a highly introspective approach, Franz Boas and his numerous students carried out a multidisciplinary research agenda in anthropology, archaeology, psychology and linguistics. They created the foundations for the systematic investigation of culture in the twentieth century. Generally speaking, the Boasian perspective on culture intersects human behaviours and emotions (Scupin, 2018). Conventionally considered as the founder of American anthropology, Franz Boas had a rich intellectual biography marked by many disciplinary and territorial transitions from Germany to the United States and from geography to anthropology. His participatory studies of indigenous populations mirrored an increasingly multicultural American context marked by immigration and globalisation. He built a name for himself as an interdisciplinary scholar with an eclectic academic background from physics and geography to linguistics,

anthropology and psychology. As a German-Jewish immigrant, trained in German universities in the late nineteenth century, Boas came to the United States with an intellectual baggage that included the works of many European thinkers including Johann Gottfried von Herder and Adolf Bastian (Espagne, 2002).

Greatly influenced by German philosophers, the Boasians triggered the silent renaissance of the concept of *Einfühlung*. In an attempt to describe the psychological reality of cultural phenomena, scholars such as Edward Sapir personalised the concept of culture (Preston, 1966). This approach should not surprise us. Since human beings act differently when they are isolated or in group, one must examine individual and collective patterns of behaviour (O'Meara, 1999). Sapir wanted to explore personal meanings and individual personality dynamics that motivate culturally defined thoughts, feelings and actions (Preston, 1966).

It is essential to note that the Boasian conception of culture lies on Herder's idea of psychic unity of mankind promoted by Adolf Bastian who mentored and guided Boas throughout his training (Scupin, 2018). The triad Herder--Bastian-Boas has a special epistemological importance. Boas (1887) argued that "the origin of every science we find in two different desires of the human mind—its aesthetic wants and the feelings" (p. 139). This statement finds echoes in the Herder's notion of *Einfühlung* and the definitions proposed Juvekar and Murali (2022) who define it as aesthetic sympathy. In his exploration of psychological phenomena, Franz Boas was not interested in the study social actors and their interactions. Instead, he gave more priority to internal mechanisms of the human mind in order to analyse emotional associations to activities and habits in different cultural contexts (Verdon, 2007). Even collective phenomena, such as "the strong feeling of nationality" (Boas, 1901, p. 10), were analysed through psychological lenses. The descriptions of artistic and cultural phenomena, provided by Boas, showcased a great emphasis on emotional dimensions and subjective interpretations. To describe indigenous cultures, Boas noted that "it may be that their art is quite contrary to our artistic feeling" (Boas, 1901, p. 5). His students inherited this culturally sensitive perspective. The psychological and emotional dimension penetrated the field

of anthropology through a strong and long-lasting appeal and persuasion intensified by the solidified values of American anthropology. After Boas, Edward Sapir developed his approach based on personalised perceptions of the complexity and uncertainty of the surrounding world. This strategy served to direct and focus the anthropological inquiry towards actual acting, thinking and feeling individuals (Preston, 1966). Since culture shapes our conceptions of self (Tehranian, 1998), the personalised approaches unleash the full potential of anthropology and cultural studies.

Among the most remarkable effects of the Herderian-Boasian vision upon North American scholarship is the re-conceptualisation of intercultural relations and relatively small cultural units. One should remember that an important feature of indigenous life was the extraordinary number of distinct cultural groups within the same population. In the light of cultural narratives, Herder privileged distinctiveness over size or physical power of a determined culture (Kroeber, 1992).

Via the German *Einfühlung*, American anthropology acquired new configurations. Boas relied on Herder's notion of *Einfühlung* to create the basis of the anthropological method (Özyürek, 2018). Despite its explicit emphasis on introspection, this notion promotes the cultural analysis and the respect for the otherness. Empathy became a moral and scientific value (Nowak, 2011). Through a Herderian view on cultures, Boas and his followers reinforced their arguments and secured a central place in American Anthropology. The Boasians canonised the notion of cultural relativism. Thanks to their efforts, relativism has broken new grounds (Brown, 2008). In addition, the link between the notion of culture and the idea of belonging or fellowship obtained more solid configurations. "The feeling of fellowship in the horde expands to the feeling of unity of the tribe, to a recognition of bonds established by a neighbourhood of habitat, and further on to the feeling of fellowship among members of nation" (Boas, 1901, p. 10).

Another important consequence of Boasian anthropology was the focus on the culturally devastated and isolated. American anthropologists repeatedly recorded indigenous languages and stories. They also produced rich descriptions of cultural practices from the last survivors of tribal peoples. Since a genuinely Herderian approach inhibits simplistic idealisations of primitive

cultures, American anthropologists centred their attention on particular individuals and their stories (Kroeber, 1992). One can observe a progressively narrower focus. In American anthropology, the individual gradually became a key element. Large collective variables lost their research supremacy. It was Boas who warned the anthropologists not to blend the similarity of behavioural patterns with the similarity of causes (O'Meara, 1999). Through culture, the individual defines and expresses unique personality structures and continually extends them. Culture and personality structures interact very tightly. The everyday experiences and distinctive responses show the unique structures of the subconscious of each individual. Using their re-interpretive and creative abilities, cultural actors respond to the micro-milieus that they perceive (Preston, 1966). It seems important to emphasise that from this perspective, each individual represents an active cultural actor. Through an intensely personal study of small societies, the Boasian anthropology provided grounding for the later resurgence of Native American self-awareness. Many Native Americans were able to recover a considerable body of knowledge about their tribal roots and heritage thanks to the aid of Boasian scientists (Kroeber, 1992).

Einfühlung and Psychoanalysis

The idea of *Einfühlung* represents an essential element for the development of psychoanalytic theories (Gallese, 2008). There are tight links between the notion of *Einfühlung* and "the projection of one's own unconscious feelings and inner imagined movements" (Pais, 2024, p. 65). This interdisciplinary notion emerged in the eighteenth century as tool for the analysis of the human psyche (Nowak, 2011) and was defined by German scholars as a subconscious process (Patoine, 2022). In his teachings and research work, Boas put the stress on the significance of culture and on the conscious and unconscious structures of mind for individuals within specific historical and geographical contexts (Scupin, 2018). Discussions on the new psychoanalytic models began very early within the Boasian circle. Alexander Goldenweiser, for example, wrote a book on Sigmund Freud's totem (Murray, 1981).

The notion of *Einfühlung* strongly matches Freud's take on empathy (Gallese, 2008). He discussed cultural experiences in terms of psychoanalysis. His view of culture always implies a continuous struggle between *Eros* and the death instinct. According to this approach, cultural systems regulate interpersonal life. Freud did not fully apply his psychoanalytic approach to culture because for him culture represented a public matter, not an element of the psychic life of each individual (Kwon, 2005). It was in the United States that the psychoanalytic approach of culture started to be properly applied. In American anthropology, the notion of the self, as the showcase of a larger collective harmony, provided a potent model for studying the relation between the individual and culture. This complex model is most popularly illustrated in Ruth Benedict's book *Patterns of Culture* (Schrempp, 1989). Benedict produced a complex vision of culture and its intersections with history and psychology:

> The difficulty with naive interpretations of culture in terms of individual behaviour is not that these interpretations are those of psychology, but that they ignore history and the historical process of acceptance or rejection of traits (Benedict, 1934, p. 168).

The emphasis on psychology has specific epistemological goals. According to De Vos (2011), the psychologising of subjectivity carries the promise of a harmonious approach in science and research. The concept of *Einfühlung* represents an intersection between philosophical aesthetics and psychology (Curtis, 2014). The Boasians took full advantage of the new theoretical movements of the twentieth century. They employed psychoanalytic notions to describe cultural phenomena, traditions and behaviours. For instance, Boas (1901) argued that "customary actions which are of very frequent repetition become entirely unconscious" (p. 9). As a matter of fact, the Boasians took psychoanalysis to the next level. While psychoanalytic theory has seen the individual's personality as largely determined by early childhood events, anthropologists such as Edward Sapir, acknowledged the shortcomings of this view and tried to find the balance between pre-cultural and cultural influences on personality (Preston, 1966). "The circulation of psychoanalytic representations of the self is part and parcel

of this process of psychologization" (Parker, 2010, p. 26). Just like psychoanalysis, the gradual psychologisation of science and culture touches the very core of human subjectivity (De Vos, 2011). In psychoanalytic models, the individual transcends its status of passive and repressed member of a given cultural group. The individual becomes a powerful mechanism of cultural webs by actively creating and influencing mental and collective representations (Kwon, 2005). The view that ideas guide human behaviour and that every culture represents a unique expression of the human spirit has its roots in the works of Herder who deeply influenced, the father of American anthropology, Franz Boas (Trigger, 2004). The Boasians and his followers conducted complex fieldworks that aimed to discern the subconscious motives and psychological processes and their impact on culture (Bronner, 2021).

Individualism in North American Anthropology

As shown in the previous subchapters, the concept of *Einfühlung* had a great impact on American scholarship. Of course, nowadays the term "empathy" is a lot more frequent. Anglophone scientists captured the sense *Einfühlung* but used a word with Greek origins (Lanzoni, 2012). The German notion emanates a special aura. Even when the word itself is not explicitly used, numerous authorial intentions and epistemological contexts reflect a striking resemblance to its main principles (Curtis, 2014). While American individualism and personalistic approaches have deep roots in many European philosophical traditions, Herder's contribution remains constantly overlooked (Curtis, 2012). We often forget that the Herderian approaches secured the basis for anthropological perspectives not only on culture but also the idea of individuality. Herder emphasised the central role of the link between feelings and selfhood. "The simple, rooted feeling of existence, for which there is no equivalent, is happiness" (Herder, 1800/1784, p. 221). Through Herder's relativistic concept of culture, the Boasian anthropology gave a special importance to the study of individual and collective behaviours. "Boas' social outlook was organized around a theory of democratic individualism" (Stern, 1943, p. 317). His postulates gained prominence through powerful discursive parallels. "It is the task of

education to teach that every individual should be appraised according to his(/her) personality" (Boas, 1937, p. 232). Learning from the interactions between individuals remains a common idea behind the dominant definitions of culture (O'Meara, 1999). From this point of view, the role each and every individual received a much firmer and clearer focus.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the concept of *Einfühlung* actively circulated within the walls of American academia (Lanzoni, 2012). The German *Einfühlung* influenced American and European art and philosophy (Patoine, 2022). The analysis of this notion provides a new perspective on humanities and social sciences (Curtis, 2014). Generally speaking, it opened the way for a more personalistic and individualistic perspective on culture and cultural phenomena. O'Meara (1999) suggests that casual individualism emerged as a strategy to unify North American anthropology. In order to overcome fragmentation and conflicts between schools, the multiple subfields of American anthropology have taken organic human beings rather than superorganic systems as their main subject matter. By doing so, anthropologists become able to describe what people individually and collectively believe, think and do. This perspective brings to light personal decisions, actions, meanings, motivations and moralisations. Individual development and experiences came to operate as indispensable elements for understanding social facts.

The Western culture of the autonomous self has created strong internalised representations (Kwon, 2005). From a historical and epistemological point of view, individualism became one of the greatest pillars of contemporary knowledge systems. O'Meara (1999) defines individualism, more particularly, casual individualism, as "the empirical claim that understanding why human affairs occur as they do requires and is limited to causal-mechanical explanations of the operations of and interactions among individual human beings and other physical entities" (p. 107).

Individualism would be impossible without a deeper examination of psychological factors. The notion of *Einfühlung* contributed to the gradual development of more complex approaches of understanding and appreciation of psychological variables, such as feelings and intentions. Researchers started to contemplate the specificity of particular cases and the importance of considering

individual dimensions. The introvert turn into the individual self creates new learning opportunities by promoting self-knowledge and self-reflection. This turn did not exclude the idea of openness to the other and respect for the difference (Nowak, 2011). This unique combination between interiority and exteriority found a special resonance in the United States. Individualism lies at the heart of the American concept of culture and anthropology in general. Despite common assumptions, casual individualism implies a deep sociological perspective. American anthropologists agree that culture guides human behaviour. In fact, from an anthropological point of view, society and culture would have no existence or meaning without individual people (O'Meara, 1999). Preston (1966) labels the methods in the Boasian tradition, particularly the tools developed by his student, Edward Sapir, as a personalistic social psychology because the main tasks of anthropologists is not only to observe social interactions, but also to extract the meanings that individuals create from their interactions. Sapir's focus on the individual *locus* of culture opened the possibility to understand the great variety of individual cultural experiences (Stern, 2022).

During the early twentieth century, the reintroduction of the notion of *Einfühlung* came as a consequence of an increasingly strong interest in the psychology of perception (Nowak, 2011). One can explore an individual's culture through the lens of both individual and collective representations. All human beings participate in the process of creating and interacting through different modes of representations. Detailed descriptions of public spheres cannot adequately illustrate neither collectivistic nor individualistic cultures. There is a mutual interdependence. Cultures are represented in people's psyches, which are in turn constantly shaped through cultural dynamics (Kwon, 2005). The focus on the individual in American anthropology is classified by Preston (1966) as a profoundly humanistic orientation that has a major impact on the study and representation of cultures.

Personalisation of Culture via Einfühlung

With the rise of new forms of arts and the development of cinema during the twentieth century, individuals started to contemplate and experience space

and cultural dynamics in a more multidimensional manner. In this context, the concept of *Einfühlung* remerged with a greater power and fulfilled the growing need to examine complex phenomena such as immersion and abstraction (Curtis, 2012). *Einfühlung*, as a theoretical tool, improves our understanding of the prelinguistic dimension of human intersubjectivity (Gallese, 2008). Debates on the notion of *Einfühlung* open interdisciplinary discussions (Curtis, 2014).

Boas positioned his notion of culture not only in relation to science and cosmopolitanism but also in relation to consciousness (Briggs, 2005). Reintroduction of the idea of *Einfühlung* into contemporary philosophy and historiography has complex configurations (Nowak, 2011). The Boasians made the personalisation of culture faster and more robust. Their approach reduced the distance between the individual and social factors in the analysis of cultural processes. "In reality, society and the individual are not antagonists. His culture provides the raw material of which the individual makes his life" (Benedict, 1934, p. 181). This vision evolved into a renewed concept of culture and idea of subjectivity that we use in the in the contemporary era:

> There is a cultural imperative for a constant quest for the "inner Self", its cultivation, examination, and, of course, realisation, as necessary for 'success', 'happiness' or even just 'wellbeing'. An endless reflection on emotions, their interpretations, and actions to manage them is encouraged (Lerner & Rivkin-Fish, 2021, p. 6).

Today the idea of culture and the idea selfhood became fused in collective representations and practices. The Herderian notions naturally evolved into a personalised approach. Herder not only introduced the plural term "cultures" but also rethought the notion of subjectivity and selfhood. His philosophy revolutionised the idea of selfhood by constructing a complex theoretical network between emotions, identity, cultural representations and imaginary relations. Herder did not underestimate the importance of understating the uniqueness of each human being and what ensures selfhood (Holzhey, 2006). For him, the individuals cannot dissolve themselves in romantic unions, group formations, cultural or national networks. The idea of selfhood and

the theoretical links to *Einfühlung* represent an often forgotten milestone in the Herderian legacy. Through the notion of *Einfühlung*, philosophers and scientists can achieve a dynamic harmony between the need for immersion and the study of the other (Nowak, 2011). The Boasians continued the Herderian legacy, spreading his conceptual frameworks throughout their careers. Edward Sapir's personalised approach displays the full potential of the concept of culture and its plural nature. He used a personalistic method for the multidimensional study of individuals-in-culture (Preston, 1966). In the contemporary era, the personalisation of culture via Herder's *Einfühlung* unfolds as a multi-faceted process with identifiable historical characteristics. Its significance invites a critical questioning of traditional conventions and representations of culture.

Conclusion

Despite its numerous meanings, the concept of *Einfühlung* most often implies the existence of a dynamic component, whether overt or inner (Lanzoni, 2012). The idea of *Einfühlung* contributed to an ecological shift not only in literary studies but also in the general scientific life (Patoine, 2022). Throughout centuries, this construct did not lose its power and appeal. As a theoretical tool, *Einfühlung* has a great potential in contemporary research (Curtis, 2014) because today's society reflects major identity struggles that need a multi-layered cultural analysis from community and individual perspectives (Tehranian, 1998). In this complicated conjuncture, the Herderian-Boasian notion of culture helps us understand the complex interactions between individuals and cultural phenomena. It is essential to note that Boas understood cultural processes as mental ones (Verdon, 2007). Psychologisation served as an essential ideological element not only in mainstream psychology but also psychoanalysis (De Vos, 2011). Heavily influenced by psychoanalytic perspectives, the field of psychology has expanded to embrace the nuclear role of culture in the gradual construction of self and representational experiences (Kwon, 2005).

Today the term "culture" became related with the idea of distinctiveness (Steigerwald, 2004). Recognising our unique ways of understanding and

interpreting cultural phenomena opens new debates on the concept of *Einfühlung* which carries a heavy Herderian legacy and an amalgam of different disciplines and fields of study (Curtis, 2014) This eclectic construct creates interdisciplinary opportunities through an emotional perception of the world that goes beyond a purely intellectual reflection (Nowak, 2011). The idea of *Einfühlung* has tight links with the present-day notions of presence and immersion (Curtis, 2012) and left an impressive mark in science and philosophy. We became aware that knowledge of people's lives significantly adds to our appreciation of them as human beings. Therefore, the humanistic nature of anthropology can be observed in the continuous attempts to analyse people and their ways of life, and to explain individual behaviours (O'Meara, 1999). The study of the notion of *Einfühlung* improves the understanding of this tendency and reinforces our critical analysis of the cotemporary conceptual frameworks.

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Humanities, Higher Education, and the Digital Age:
An Overview of the Provision of Online Taught Postgraduate Programmes at the Four Ancient Scottish Universities

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Abstract: As demonstrated by their fundamental role in our modern societies, the humanities represent an important area of research and study at university level. However, in the light of increased social, economic, and political interest in STEM-related subjects, the humanities appear to have become less prominent in recent years. Noting the rise of online education, this study presents and analyses the online taught postgraduate provision currently available at the four ancient universities in Scotland (St Andrews, Glasgow, Aberdeen, and Edinburgh). After a short historical summary of the position of the humanities in university education, as well as the particularities of Scotland and the four selected universities, this study employs a qualitative and desk-based approach to analyse the relevant online programmes. It aims to look at the types of subject areas covered, the level of qualifications available, as well as giving a comparative overview of the different offerings, thus illustrating and discussing the range of online humanities-based provision at the present time.

Keywords: humanities in the 21st century, medieval universities, online degrees, postgraduate education, Scotland

Introduction

Commonly considered one of the cornerstones of modern-day tertiary institutions, the university teaching of the humanities has a storied history dating back to medieval times (Gertz, 2017). As part of the curricula of early European universities, what would nowadays be described as the humanities permeated the trivium, the foundational grounding in grammar, logic, and rhetoric which provided the basis for the more advanced quadrivium, whose four subjects comprised astronomy, arithmetic, geometry, and music (Pendley, 2009). These were the subsequent underpinnings for the traditional faculties of philosophy, law, theology, and medicine of many older universities, which—as Szell (2024, p. 2) reiterates—offered training for future members of the clergy as well as for legal and medical practitioners.

From this distant base in the Middle Ages, subsequent intellectual, sociocultural, and technological developments over the centuries (such as the invention of the printing press, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution) impacted all areas of human activity, and thus also the teaching and study of the humanities, broadening the field and expanding it in ways far beyond what could have previously been imagined.

Yet, for all the omnipresent discussions about the humanities in modern-day academia and society, the question of which disciplines and fields of study are included in it remains somewhat imprecise. The Cambridge Dictionary defines the humanities as "the study of subjects such as literature, language, history, and philosophy", with its American variant noting it as "literature, language, history, philosophy, and other subjects that are not a science, or the study of these subjects" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025). More expansively, the online entry in the Encyclopaedia Britannica terms the humanities as "those branches of knowledge that concern themselves with human beings and their culture", again distinguishing them from the sciences (including "somewhat less decisively, from the social sciences"), and listing the subject areas covered as the arts, languages and their literatures, philosophy, and history (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2025).

In an online blogpost for the British Academy entitled 'What are the humanities?', eminent historian Diarmaid MacCulloch notes their breadth and depth and the various forms of analysis and enquiry utilised, observing that the institution "gathers scholarly expertise in subjects like law, philosophy, the history of art and music, religions, language and its meanings, literature and all forms of human history, right back to the unwritten history that can only be approached through archaeology"(MacCulloch, 2018).

These definitions can perhaps be contrasted with the day-to-day reality of the modern world, where science and technology seem to dominate current global discourse. Indeed, with politics, commerce, and society-at-large seemingly favouring the attributes and skills linked to curricula based on the STEM subjects of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (Breiner et al., 2012, pp. 4–5), the role of the humanities in the present era remains open to discussion. To this end, the British Academy (2025a) has also recently developed the overarching concept of SHAPE (an acronym for Social sciences, Humanities and the Arts for People

and the Economy), thus highlighting the role of the humanities, *inter alia*, within its broader policymaking activities (British Academy, 2025b). Therefore, as this thematic issue presents, the place of the humanities in modern twenty-first century universities remain an important issue, as well as in society at large (Linstead & Lehman, 2023, pp. 8–9). As mentioned elsewhere with regard to the study, teaching, and professional practice of languages and translation (Hoyte-West, 2024a), ceaseless advances in technological development, the use of generative AI for a multitude of purposes, and market forces in an uncertain sociopolitical climate have meant that humanities-based education has had to evolve in this digital world.

In observing some of these responses to these ever-changing circumstances, this article aims to present and analyse the online taught postgraduate provision in humanities currently available at the four oldest universities in Scotland: St Andrews, Glasgow, Aberdeen, and Edinburgh. In illustrating the range of programmes available as depicted in the institutions' prospectuses, the study forms part of a larger project looking at various facets of this phenomenon. To date, these have examined aspects such as the depiction of digital skills in the online prospectuses for postgraduate programmes in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) at Scottish universities (Hoyte-West, 2024b), as well as the representation of digital aspects into postgraduate interpreter training courses at British institutions (Hoyte-West, 2024c). An earlier study also examines the presence of literary translation modules in postgraduate British degree programmes in translation and interpreting (Hoyte-West, 2023a). Therefore, the present study offers some short general remarks on humanities and university education by providing a cursory historical overview, before focusing on Scotland, its unique education system, and the place of the four universities therein. After outlining the background to the case studies and the methodology utilised, the relevant research findings will then be presented and discussed.

Brief observations on the humanities and university education in the United Kingdom

British education is often highly regarded on the international stage, and according to official reports, the United Kingdom is commonly ranked second

(after the United States of America) in terms of the most popular global study destinations for international students (Bolton, Lewis, & Gower, 2024, p. 4). This can perhaps be ascribed to the reputation and quality of many of the country's tertiary institutions, including the notable examples of Oxford and Cambridge. In frequently dominating international university rankings (e.g., see Times Higher Education, 2025), those two institutions are not only known for their ground-breaking research and teaching, but also for their iconic status in literature, culture, and society (Dougill, 2010; Hoyte-West, 2024d). The widespread popularity of British university education could also be linked to the current role and status of English, whose influence as the lingua franca of the international academic world—and thus a global language of prestige and advancement—cannot be underestimated (see British Council, 2013, p. 7).

In the specific context of England, Oxford and Cambridge were the sole universities in the country from their foundations in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries up until the early nineteenth century, thus qualifying as the two oldest universities in the English-speaking world (University of Oxford, 2025; University of Cambridge, 2025). In the Kingdom of Scotland, however, institutions were founded in four cities during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and thus, despite its smaller size, for several hundred years it had twice as many universities as England, with the first university in Ireland founded in the mid-sixteenth century (Bell, 2000, p. 166).

With the country expanding to eventually encompass the entirety of the British Isles, the advent of the Industrial Revolution and Britain's colonial aspirations meant that the United Kingdom became a major world power during the nineteenth century. During this era, politics, commerce, and manufacturing became increasingly important (Allen, 2011), with corresponding effects on the country's educational landscape. In 1826, University College London was founded as England's third university, notable for the fact that it did not have the religious requirements then imposed at Oxford and Cambridge (Harte, North, & Brewis, 2018, p. 13). As the powerhouse of empire, trade, and industry, the market called for more academic qualifications and training, which—allied with the development of the professions—often became necessary for social and economic advancement (Duman, 1979; Scott, 1993, p. 4). As such, new academic

institutions sprang up in the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries (later to be known as 'red-brick'—see Whyte, 2015, pp. 6–9) and curricula began to change. With regard to the humanities, the former dominance of Latin and Greek—both as objects of study and as languages of teaching—was eroding in the light of 'new' degrees offered in then newfangled subjects such as English literature (Bacon, 1986).

Consequently, other forms of education began to be created by the universities in order to cater to different audiences. These included the development of correspondence studies including the University of London's extensive programme, which offered its first distance-learning qualifications in 1858 and still does so (University of London, 2025; also Tight, 2005). In addition, Britain's rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, combined with advances in compulsory schooling and increased literacy rates, led to the provision of extramural studies for working people and others (Brake, 2024). Also notable was the fact that, after the mid-nineteenth century, university education for women became increasingly permitted, though in many cases they were not allowed to complete degrees or had to undertake a special course of study—by way of example, St Andrews awarded women the degree of Lady Literate in Arts (LLA) (Smith, 2014). Other developments relevant to the humanities included the adoption of the modern-style PhD by British universities in the early twentieth century (Park, 2005, p. 192), which, as we all know, has become ubiquitous over the ensuing decades.

Alongside the profound societal changes of post-war Britain and the end of the British Empire, the university environment was also evolving. In the 1950s and 1960s, new institutions (the so-called 'plate-glass' universities, due to their campus architecture) were created (Beloff, 1970 [1968], pp. 11–12). In the 1990s, many polytechnics were given degree-awarding powers and became full universities (Emms, 2022), and the first decades of the new millennium have again seen changes such as the development of overseas campuses of British universities (Bennell, 2019) in addition to—as will be presented here— the development of programmes based on online teaching and learning modalities. These aspects have been accompanied by other relevant factors which have impacted the humanities—for example, the adoption of neoliberal policies at the political level and the perceived need for universities to represent

'added value'; the upsurge in domestic and international student numbers; and the introduction of fees (and student loans) for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes (for a discussion of these matters, see Brown & Hillman, 2023).

Writing in the 1980s, the well-known satirical novels of the late David Lodge poked fun at these then-nascent trends and their effects on the humanities. In his so-called 'Campus Trilogy' of works (Tripney, 2011)[1], Lodge provided a humorous take on the pressures and strains posed by changing academic and societal conditions through the lens of a fictional exchange between the English literature departments of a British and an American university, involving many culturally-related escapades and other comic shenanigans. Though Lodge did anticipate the rise of technology in his fiction (e.g., see Lodge, 1986 [1984], pp. 242–243), the development and uptake of the internet and associated technologies over the past decades has utterly transformed the domain of education. As exemplified by the forced shift to online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, in many countries and education systems this modality has now become commonplace (Hoyte-West, 2023b). As the way we use and access information is changing, the importance attached to degrees and programmes of study is also evolving, as illustrated by the creation of non-assessed courses such as MOOCs (Papadakis, 2023) and the development of highly-focused microcredentials (Varadarajan, Koh, & Daniel, 2023).

Globalisation has also enhanced supranational efforts to standardise and enhance the mutual recognition of university qualifications, such as the implementation of the Bologna Process and the tripartite bachelor-master-doctorate degree system (Wächter, 2004). In general global terms, it has also been argued that such broader approaches are also influencing disciplinary discourses (i.e., the way that academic knowledge is taught and produced), with the resulting need for authors to write in English and to adapt their writing styles to Anglo-American models for publication in prestigious outlets (Lehman, 2025, pp. 26–29). In the context of the humanities and online education, the influence

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[1] These were the acclaimed novels *Changing Places* (1975), *Small World* (1984), and *Nice Work* (1988). The latter two were both shortlisted for the prestigious Booker Prize (see The Booker Prizes, 2025).

of external market forces can be added to these factors, as well as the need to amend programmes and syllabi to reflect changing student demands and expectations (Twining et al., 2021; also Hoyte-West, 2024a, p. 9), especially given that many students nowadays can often be considered as digital natives (Bayraktar & Tomczyk, 2021).

As recent media reports have demonstrated (e.g., see Adams, 2025; Ferguson, 2025, etc.), the higher education sector in the United Kingdom currently appears to be undergoing a period of instability. This has meant that departments have been earmarked for closure or their offerings curtailed, and staff redundancies have been implemented (Hoyte-West, 2024e, p. 293). In addition, student numbers have noticeably declined in certain disciplines for varying reasons, for example in some humanities-based subjects such as modern languages (Bowler, 2020). Accordingly, given this uncertainty, it is therefore pertinent to investigate the situation regarding the tertiary provision of humanities-based education, as the present study aims to do through analysis of the relevant online postgraduate provision offered by four selected universities.

The Scottish education system and the four ancient universities

The presence of four ancient universities in Scotland is clear evidence of the country's long heritage of tertiary education. With a lengthy history as an independent kingdom until the 1707 Act of Union, one of the many ways which Scotland retains its distinctive identity is through its education system, which differs substantially from England, Wales, and Northern Ireland (Bell, 2000). As also outlined in Hoyte-West (2024b), Scottish university education is typically based on a four-year undergraduate honours degree, after which a one-year taught master's degree is followed which qualifies individuals for doctoral study. Though similar to some European countries (such as Spain, which also follows a 4+1 model—see Elias, 2010, p. 55), this is different to the rest of the United Kingdom, where three-year undergraduate degrees followed by a one-year taught master's programme are generally the norm (Nuffic, 2025a).

In profiling the humanities provision of the four ancient universities of Scotland, it must be noted that one key shared feature is that each institution's traditional first degree in arts and humanities is the so-called Scottish MA (Bell, 2000, p. 168). This is a four-year honours degree which, despite carrying the title of Master of Arts, is in fact an undergraduate-level qualification[2]. To avoid confusion with postgraduate taught MA degrees offered elsewhere in the United Kingdom, taught postgraduate degrees in humanities subjects at the four ancient universities use different nomenclature and are thus typically designated as either Master of Letters (MLitt) or Master of Science (MSc) qualifications (Nuffic, 2025b).

In common with many British universities, the European Credit and Transfer System (ECTS) is not widely utilised in Scotland; rather, the Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework (SCQF) is used instead, with a full semester of study comprising 60 SCQF credits, or 30 ECTS. In Scotland, the majority of full-time taught master's degrees typically comprise a full year of study—two taught semesters plus a dissertation completed over the summer. Thus, this leads to a total credit volume of 180 SCQF credits, or 90 ECTS. Depending on the university and programme, postgraduate certificate (PGCert) or postgraduate diploma (PGDip) qualifications may be available to students as exit awards on certain programmes, or as standalone credentials in their own right. This is generally subject to the successful completion of taught courses representing the full-time equivalent of one semester (60 credits, 30 SCQF ECTS) in the case of the PGCert, or of two semesters (120 SCQF credits, 60 ECTS) in the case of the PGDip (for more information, see SCQF, 2025).

Turning to the specific aims of this study, Table 1 below provides more information about the humanities-based provision and relevant administrative structure of the four institutions which are analysed in this article, presented in chronological order by year of foundation.

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[2]   For historical reasons, the University of Dundee (founded 1967) also awards the Scottish MA as an undergraduate degree owing to the fact that the then University College Dundee was part of the University of St Andrews between 1897 and 1967 (University of Dundee, 2017).

Table 1. Relevant information about the four ancient universities of Scotland

Institution	Year founded	Total student numbers	Relevant Faculty/College	Relevant Schools
University of St Andrews	1413	10,234	Faculty of Arts	Art History; Classics; Economics and Finance; English; History; International Relations; Management; Modern Languages; Philosophical, Anthropological, and Film Studies
University of Glasgow	1451	c. 43,000	College of Arts & Humanities	Critical Studies; Culture and Creative Arts; Humanities; Modern Languages and Cultures
University of Aberdeen	1495	c. 14,000	-	Divinity, History, Philosophy and Art History; Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture
University of Edinburgh	1583	49,065	College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences	Business School; Divinity; Economics; Edinburgh College of Art; Health in Social Science; History, Classics and Archaeology; Law; Literatures, Languages and Cultures; Moray House School of Education and Sport; Philosophy, Psychology and Language Sciences; Social and Political Sciences

Source: The author, based on University of St Andrews (2025a; 2025b), University of Glasgow (2025a; 2025b), University of Aberdeen (2025a; 2025b), and University of Edinburgh (2025a; 2025b).

Despite being of similar age, the universities vary considerably in their composition as the above table demonstrates. Though it is the oldest institution, St Andrews has the lowest number of student enrolments, which can be

contrasted with the large student bodies of big urban universities such as Glasgow and Edinburgh. In terms of the organisational structure regarding humanities provision, only one university (St Andrews) has retained the traditional Faculty of Arts. Edinburgh and Glasgow have both opted for broader colleges which bring together a wider range of subjects and disciplines, thus reflecting the intricate relationships and the often-unclear boundaries between the humanities, arts, and social sciences. Aberdeen appears to have foregone the faculty or college structures, opting for the nomenclature of "Schools". Indeed, St Andrews and Edinburgh have also seemingly adopted this approach, with the named entities clearly relating to the specific humanities and social sciences taught (for example, such as "History, Classics and Archaeology" or "Philosophical, Anthropological, and Film Studies", etc.). At Glasgow, some the titles of individual schools (save for 'Modern Languages and Cultures') are perhaps less self-explanatory. Further investigation, though, reveals that the Schools of Critical Studies teaches English language & linguistics, Scottish and English literature, and creative writing (University of Glasgow, 2025c); the School of Culture and Creative Arts is responsible for subject areas including art history, music, theatre studies, creative and cultural heritage and policy, and film and television studies (University of Glasgow, 2025d); and the School of Humanities teaches inter alia archaeology, classics, history, philosophy, as well as Gaelic and Celtic studies (University of Glasgow, 2025e).

To summarise briefly at this point, these varied offerings demonstrate the broad range of humanities subjects currently available at Scotland's four oldest universities. However, as deeper examination of the relevant online provision will detail in greater depth, it remains to be seen whether this breadth is reflected in the various online taught postgraduate programmes on offer at the present time.

Methodology and approach

In common with the author's previous studies which evaluated the portrayal of digital aspects in the prospectus for postgraduate courses in TESOL and in

interpreting (Hoyte-West, 2024b; 2024c), this study adopts a similar approach. The principal aim, therefore, is to look at whether the four ancient universities offer online taught postgraduate options in the humanities; what types of subject areas are available; the level of qualifications on offer (PGCert, PGDip, MSc/MLitt); and a brief comparative overview of the content of the relevant programmes.

In deciding what was to be designated as the humanities for the purposes of this analysis, the encyclopaedia and dictionary definitions offered at the beginning of this article can be reiterated (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2025; Cambridge Dictionary, 2025). Accordingly, this meant a primary focus on the more limited domain of historical, philosophical, philological, and literary subjects, though a holistic approach also enabled other relevant subjects, including interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary fields, to be included where relevant.

As with the previous publications, the online postgraduate prospectuses for the four universities were consulted, and thus a qualitative desk-based methodological approach was employed (Bassot, 2022). Given the date of enquiry was in mid-March 2025, this meant that the qualifications and programmes listed were generally for student entry in autumn 2025—i.e., at the beginning of the 2025/2026 academic year. These online portals were analysed by the researcher, and it was observed that there were several differences—for example, sometimes the available programmes were arranged thematically by subject areas, and at other times in alphabetical order or by teaching modality (e.g., in-person/online). Having consulted these portals, a list of the humanities-based offerings was compiled and then evaluated by the researcher as to their relevance to the current project.

Research findings

In presenting the findings in chronological order of the university's foundation, the results for the St Andrews—via the website's course search function (University of St Andrews, 2025c) with the terms "postgraduate" and

"online"—returned a total of 22 items on the day of consultation, of which two could be said to be directly linked to humanities-linked provision. These were the online programmes in Digital Art History, offered at the PGCert, PGDip, and MLitt level (University of St Andrews, 2025d), as well as the Global Digital Humanities programmes, which also offered the same three qualification options (University of St Andrews, 2025e). As the titles suggest, both programmes were concerned with bringing together digital approaches to the field and incorporated relevant modules in computer sciences. In the case of the latter, modules focusing on philological and literary subjects included offerings in 'Digital Global Literatures', which sought to allow "students to enhance the analysis and presentation of literary texts with advanced digital and computational techniques" and modules in 'Digital Modern Languages' and 'Memory and Storytelling in the Digital Age', focusing on the intersection of technology with the language industry, narratives, and cultural practices (University of St Andrews, 2025e). Humanities-related provision was also identified as a component of several other degrees, such as the online MLitt degree (with PGDip option) in Bible and Contemporary World, offered by the School of Divinity and which aimed to link "biblical and theological studies with other disciplines in the arts, humanities and social sciences", including via a core module in Theology and Arts which linked Christianity with music, literary studies, and fine art (University of St Andrews, 2025f). In addition, the online MLitt in Iranian Studies also contained modules on the history of Iran and Persia, as well as the opportunity for Persian language tuition at different levels (University of St Andrews, 2025g). Further offerings with some broader humanities-linked content include the postgraduate programme (PGCert, PGDip, MLitt) in Museums, Heritage and Society (University of St Andrews, 2025h). Though exact module information for the 2025/26 academic year appeared not be available at the time of consultation, previous modules relevant to the humanities focused on intangible cultural heritage, curation, and ethics. The same is true for the PGCert in Sacred Music, which included a module on the relevant historical and contemporary repertoire (University of St Andrews, 2025i). And the School of Medicine also offered a standalone online module on 'Health Humanities Approaches within Health Professions

Education', where participants could discover ways of incorporating the humanities into the teaching of healthcare-related subjects (University of St Andrews, 2025j).

Turning to the University of Glasgow, the dedicated page for online postgraduate programmes comprised 28 entries on the day of consultation (University of Glasgow, 2025e); however, the majority seemed to be focused on education studies and the sciences, including medicine. In terms of the humanities, an online MLitt in Creative Writing was listed (University of Glasgow, 2025f), as was a programme in Global Gender History with options for study at the PGCert, PGDip, and MSc level (University of Glasgow, 2025g). Yet humanities provision was also available elsewhere as, for example, in the programme on the PGCert/PGDip/MSc in End of Life Studies (University of Glasgow, 2025h). Though aimed at health professionals, it contained a module on the 'Cultural Representation of Death and Dying'. In the accompanying description of the latter, it was noted that the course looked at how these phenomena were portrayed in literature, the visual arts, and popular culture over the past five decades. It noted that participants would also "be introduced to methods of visual and literary analysis and learn to identify specific cultural tropes used to represent the end of life", as well as using examples "from different artistic genres and different countries" before embarking on a creative work of their own (University of Glasgow, 2025i).

The website of the University of Aberdeen also offers a dedicated sub-section for online study (University of Aberdeen, 2025c)—in this instance, selecting the "history and society" alongside the "postgraduate" option revealed seven results (out of 49) linked to the humanities under the criteria for this article (one, the PGDip in New Testament in Early Christianity, appeared to fall more under the domain of theological studies). Two were related to the intersection of the humanities with theology—the MLitt in Christianity and Visual Arts (also available with PGCert and PGDip possibilities) (University of Aberdeen, 2025d) and the Master of Theology (MTh) in Theology and Disability (also with PGCert and PGDip exit awards) (University of Aberdeen, 2025e). Further linked offerings included programmes to cultural heritage, such as the PGCert in Heritage and Memory Studies (University of Aberdeen, 2025f) as well as the MLitt in Scottish

Heritage, the constituent components of which are also available as short courses (University of Aberdeen, 2025g). Humanities-based offerings are also available in the MLitt in Philosophy and Society, which seeks to open up philosophy to wider audiences in an applied manner and is also available in PGDip, PGCert, and short course options (University of Aberdeen, 2025h), the PGCert in Visual and Popular Culture (University of Aberdeen, 2025i), and the MSc in Translation Studies (also with PGCert and PGDip variants), which in addition to the requisite theoretical and practical skills in technical translation also incorporated a module in literary translation (University of Aberdeen, 2025j).

Listed in alphabetical order, the University of Edinburgh's dedicated page of online postgraduate programmes included over eighty-five offerings (University of Edinburgh, 2025c), primarily in social sciences, medicine, and education studies. Of these, seven programmes were found to be directly relevant to the humanities-related criteria of this study. Two involved named disciplines from the humanities—the MSc in History (University of Edinburgh, 2025d) and the MSc in Ancient Worlds (Archaeology and Classics) (University of Edinburgh, 2025e)—and the PGCert/PGDip/MSc in Epistemology, Ethics and Mind, which focused on philosophical aspects (University of Edinburgh, 2025f). The remaining examples involved interdisciplinary collaboration via the Edinburgh Futures Institute (University of Edinburgh, 2025g), an umbrella initiative involving several Schools within the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences listed above (see Table 1). Of its programmes, four were found particularly pertinent—the MSc in Philosophy, Science and Religion (which also offered PGCert and PGDip options) (University of Edinburgh, 2025h); the MSc (and PGCert/PGDip) in Cultural Heritage Futures (University of Edinburgh, 2025i); the MSc (with PGCert and PGDip options) in Data and Artificial Intelligence Ethics (University of Edinburgh, 2025j); and the MSc in Narrative Futures: Art, Data, Society, which revolves around the study of narratives and how they can be used and function in different contexts (University of Edinburgh, 2025k). A taught online postgraduate programme in Science Communication was also found, but although involving the written and spoken word, its focus solely on the sciences (rather than interdisciplinary enquiry) meant that it was judged to be outside of this analysis.

Discussion and conclusions

Table 2. Online taught postgraduate provision in the humanities at the four ancient universities of Scotland

Institution	Programme
University of St Andrews	PGCert/PGDip/MLitt Digital Art History, PGCert/PGDip/MLitt Digital Humanities PGDip/MLitt Bible and Contemporary World, MLitt Iranian Studies (PGCert/PGDip/MLitt Museums, Heritage and Society) (PGCert Sacred Music)
University of Glasgow	MLitt Creative Writing PGCert/PGDip/MLitt Global Gender History (PGCert/PGDip/MSc End of Life Studies)
University of Aberdeen	MLitt in Scottish Heritage PGCert Heritage and Memory Studies PGCert Visual and Popular Culture PGCert/PGDip/MLitt Christianity and Visual Arts PGCert/PGDip/MLitt Philosophy and Society PGCert/PGDip/MSc Translation Studies PGCert/PGDip/MTh Theology and Disability
University of Edinburgh	MSc Ancient Worlds (Archaeology and Classics) PGCert/PGDip/MSc Data and Artificial Intelligence Ethics PGCert/PGDip/MSc Epistemology, Ethics and Mind MSc History MSc Narrative Futures: Art, Data, Society PGCert/PGDip/MSc Cultural Heritage Futures PGCert/PGDip/MSc Philosophy, Science and Religion

Source: The author based on University of St Andrews (2025d-h), University of Glasgow (2025f-i), University of Aberdeen (2025d-j), and University of Edinburgh (2025d-k).

Before discussing the findings and offering some valedictory remarks, Table 2 outlines the main relevant taught postgraduate qualifications in the humanities discussed in this section (individual modules were not listed). In general terms, it is clear that all four of the ancient universities do appear to have provision in humanities-based subjects—however, this does vary. During the data gathering procedure, it was noted that the larger institutions often have significant

offerings in the fields of education, medicine, and healthcare; indeed, this may be due to the nature of those regulated professions, where continuing professional development (CPD) or similar may be recommended or even mandatory for practitioners (e.g., see Karas et al., 2020).

With regard to the types of qualifications offered, the majority of programmes offered full qualifications at the master's (MSc, MLitt, or MTh) level, with the possibility for exit awards at the postgraduate certificate or postgraduate diploma level. In addition, there were also several standalone PGCert or PGDip certifications on offer, as well as the possibility of taking individual modules as short courses.

Turning to the subjects falling under the auspices of the humanities, this study sought to highlight the presence of historical, literary, philosophical, and philological disciplines in the online taught postgraduate offerings. As the foregoing has outlined, it was relatively rare to find qualifications with the title of a named discipline (e.g., 'History'). What was noticeable was a tendency towards interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary approaches—for example, through offering programmes which brought together different subject areas, such as philosophy and society, theology and the arts, etc. This was also highlighted in the use of humanities in modules within broader programmes aimed at other professionals, such as doctors or other healthcare professionals. A further factor was the incorporation of digital approaches to the humanities to deal with the ever-changing world (e.g., see Luhmann & Burghardt, 2022), and other pioneering specialisms which draw on diverse subject areas from the humanities and beyond. Though a full programme in translation studies and modular options in literature and language acquisition were available, the relative lack of full qualifications focusing solely on linguistic or literary studies (in English and in other languages) could perhaps be an area for further development.

At this point, it is important to underline that the observations and analysis of the taught online postgraduate provision in humanities at the four ancient universities have been subject to certain limitations, which could indeed provide the impetus for more research. Indeed, many of the limitations implied by a desk-based study—similarly to the author's prior work (Hoyte-West, 2023a; 2024b; 2024c)—could be overcome by involving the personnel involved—i.e., by talking

to and conducting interviews with staff members concerned with the creation and implementation of these programmes, as well as potentially with students and alumni of these online humanities-based postgraduate qualifications. In addition, further comparative work could expand the scope to examine the online postgraduate provision in the humanities of all of Scotland's universities, as well as different level of study (e.g., undergraduate, microcredentials, and MOOCs). And noting the more limited notion of the humanities adopted for the purposes of this study, the marked multidisciplinary interconnection between the different subject areas offered in the online postgraduate programmes has also illustrated the blurring of the disciplinary lines between the humanities, social sciences, and even beyond.

It is also important to highlight that there can be a variety of reasons underpinning the creation and implementation of online postgraduate programmes. These can, for example, include the particular interests and motivations of individual staff members (for example, in digital humanities), given that the design of bespoke materials often can require significant time, effort, and other resources. In addition, as Fawns, Gallagher, and Bayne (2021) highlight in their case study relating to the online provision at the University of Edinburgh, there are often a range of different requirements to be met, ranging from pedagogical aspects to institutional factors.

To summarise, as was mentioned at the outset of this article, the global higher education environment—and the role of the humanities therein—is changing rapidly. In offering this overview of the relevant online taught postgraduate provision at the four oldest universities in Scotland, it demonstrates that there a small but steady number of location-independent humanities programmes taught in English at high-quality institutions are available, covering a range of levels, subject areas, and with provision for future needs. As such, in terms of providing online postgraduate humanities education, it ensures that Scotland's four ancient universities continue to remain relevant for the opportunities and challenges that our present century continues to bring us.

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Poetry on the Walls: A Cultural and Literary Reading of the "Ithra" Library Inscriptions

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Abstract: This study presents a contemporary model of artistic graffiti, centering on the composition of Arabic poetry. Adopting a descriptive and analytical approach, it investigates the poetic inscriptions adorning the column walls of the "Ithra" Library in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. The research aims to interpret these inscriptions, classify them, analyze their poetic structure, and explore their aesthetic and thematic dimensions. The study focuses on selected verses, delving into the unique characteristics of the poetry and the familiar discourses it communicates to Arab audiences. It also considers the literary stature of the poets behind these works. Rather than encompassing all the poetic texts inscribed throughout the library, the research highlights representative examples drawn from various literary periods accompanied by critical commentary.

The study is structured into an introduction and three main sections. The introduction outlines the historical context of the murals and emphasizes the significance and scope of the research. Each section corresponds to a different library floor, with each axis showcasing multiple inscription models relevant to the respective floor. A conclusion summarizes the key insights and findings. This research underscores the role of aesthetic awareness in shaping cultural institutions—particularly public libraries—and highlights the importance of integrating literary discourse into visual media designed for the broader public. Ultimately, the "Ithra" Library is proposed as a model for other libraries to emulate, demonstrating the enriching potential of poetic expression in public cultural spaces.

Keywords: graffiti in Arab culture, Arabic literary tradition, poetic inscriptions, "Ithra" Library, Arabic calligraphy

Introduction

Writing poetry on walls serves multiple purposes—cognitive, historical, linguistic, aesthetic, psychological, and moral. It can also offer therapeutic benefits, both

psychological and physical, particularly for individuals seeking meaningful and conscious engagement with literary material. The walls of the "Ithra" Library embody this concept, adorned with verses from some of the most celebrated figures in Arabic poetry. The library honors 65 poets whose works span the rich timeline of Arabic literary history. These include the legendary poets of the Mu'allaqat from the pre-Islamic era, followed by key voices from the Islamic and Abbasid periods, the eloquent poets of Al-Andalus, and prominent modern poets. Together, they represent the diverse cultural and geographic tapestry of Arab society, their verses etched into the very architecture of the library's columns.

Graffiti is a historical-artistic phenomenon. It refers to "words or drawings, especially humorous, rude, or political, on walls, doors, etc. in public places" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d). It has been utilized as a method for historical documentation (Al-Khawatra, 2022). Ancient Egyptians inscribed on the walls of temples, tombs, and pyramids and documented facts, events, customs, wars, and beliefs. In addition, the ancient Arabs composed the *Mu'allaqat*, referred to as "*Mathhabat*", due to reports of their inscription in gold water and exhibition on the curtains of the Ka'ba. Graffiti represents a tradition within ancient Arab culture, particularly during its period of literary prominence (Rosser-Owen, 2022).

Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, in his *History of the Caliphs*, recounts an episode involving the Abbasid Caliph al-Mutawakkil (al-Suyuti, 2013). In the year 236 AH, al-Mutawakkil ordered the demolition of the tomb of Imam Hussein and the surrounding houses, replacing them with farmland. He prohibited visits to the site, had it plowed over, and turned it into a desolate area. His actions, which were characterized by extreme fanaticism, caused great distress among Muslims. In response, Baghdad residents expressed their outrage by writing curses and protest messages on mosque walls and public spaces (including walls of prisons) (Borling, 2013). Poets also satirized him, using literary expression as a form of resistance.

This episode illustrates how public walls have long served as canvases for social, political, and emotional expression—often through eloquent poetry or prose. Throughout Islamic history, such literary inscriptions were not

limited to paper. Instead, many of the most profound and artistic expressions were deliberately engraved on architectural surfaces such as palace walls, mosques, schools, and factories. Additionally, inscriptions were found on utensils, pens, garments, and tools—embedding literature into daily life and public memory. Ibrahim al-Bayhaqi (d. 320 AH), as cited by al-Muhasin and al-Musawi, described how texts were etched into rock and stone, becoming integral to the physical structure of buildings and monuments (Al-Bayhaqi, 1961). These inscriptions were often historical records, sacred covenants, moral exhortations, or commemorations of honor and legacy. Examples include the inscriptions on the Dome of Ghamdan, the Gate of Kairouan, the Gate of Samarkand, the Column of Ma'rib, the Corner of al-Mashqar, al-Ablaq al-Fard in Taima, and the Gate of Edessa. These sites were chosen for their prominence and cleanliness, ensuring the inscriptions remained preserved, legible, and visible to future generations.

In Andalusia, this tradition reached a peak of artistic refinement in the Alhambra Palace of Granada. Its walls are adorned with exquisite poetic inscriptions that celebrate the king, praise his virtues, and marvel at the beauty of the palace itself. Notably, three poets—who also served as the king's chamberlains and prime ministers—authored many of these verses: Ibn al-Jayyab (673–749 AH), Ibn al-Khatib (713–776 AH), and Ibn Zamrak (733–793 AH). The enduring impact of these poetic engravings is vividly captured in Nizar Qabbani's poem *Granada*, where he writes (Qabbani, n.d.):

<div dir="rtl">

وَالزَّرْكَشَاتُ عَلَى السُّقُوفِ تُنَادِي   الزَّخْرَفَاتُ أَكَادُ أَسْمَعُ نَبْضَهَا

فَاقْرَأْ عَلَى جُدْرَانِهَا أَمْجَادِي   قَالَتْ: هُنَا "الْحَمْرَاءُ، زَهْوُ جُدُودِنَا

</div>

The Arabesques—I swear I hear their pulse,
and gilded filigree on ceilings call to me.
She declared: "Here stands Al-Hamra, our ancestors' pride—
now inscribe upon its walls my glories' creed".

The "Al-Hamra" Palace, a representation of our pride and glory, is here, the girl said, and its walls testify to the Arabs' history, triumphs, and glory.

The poet conceptualizes the elaborate decorations as a living entity, ascribing to them an almost animate quality. The ceiling adornments are envisioned as whispering and beckoning to the departed, serving as a metaphor that effectively conveys a profound feeling of mourning for lost splendor. These include verses of love, moral wisdom, Quranic ayat, and poetic narratives, often found on gravestones and memorials. Noteworthy references include Abu al--Abbas Shams al-Din Ahmad ibn Khalil, known as Ibn al-Labboudi al-Shafi'i (d. 896 AH) (Ibn al-Labboudi, 2017), who wrote about the poetry found on graves, and the work Mutheir al-Azm al-Sakin Ila Ashraf al-Amakin by Abu al-Faraj Abd al-Rahman ibn al-Jawzi (d. 597 AH), which contains a chapter titled "On the Merits of What Was Written on Graves" (Ibn al-Jawzi, 1995).

Research Context and Rationale

Arabic scholarship has, for the most part, paid limited attention to the study of mural and artistic inscriptions. As Nora Amer (2006) aptly observes, "The subject of graffiti has not received even a little attention in all Arabic studies, while foreign studies are very rich in this subject, as rich as that phenomenon there is, and according to its development". This observation remains largely accurate today, highlighting a significant and ongoing gap in the field. In response, this research focuses exclusively on select Arabic-language studies, deliberately setting aside Western scholarship in order to emphasize the need for localized, culturally grounded approaches to the analysis of mural writings. This focus is particularly relevant given the growing prevalence of such inscriptions throughout the Arab world. As Abd Elhaseeb (2015) notes, there is a notable absence of research on literary texts that have transitioned from traditional formats—such as books and manuscripts—to public walls, including poetic odes, aphorisms, and proverbs. The inscriptions adorning the columns of the "Ithra" Library exemplify this emerging literary phenomenon and offer a compelling case study for further exploration. Whereas previous studies tend to examine graffiti through social, psychological, or political frameworks, the present study adopts a distinctly literary perspective. It prioritizes cultural discourse,

examines the criteria for textual selection, and explores the aesthetic functions of mural inscriptions. Unlike research that focuses primarily on the motivations behind graffiti production, this study investigates the intentional design and artistic planning involved in the placement and presentation of poetic verses within the "Ithra" Library. Additionally, this research conducts a critical evaluation of the poetic content itself—analyzing the structure, meaning, and stylistic elements of selected verses. It also identifies and addresses linguistic or stylistic inconsistencies, which are discussed in the conclusion. Finally, in contrast to earlier scholarship that often relies on Western theoretical models, this study employs close reading as its principal method of analysis. This approach enables a more nuanced and contextually sensitive interpretation of mural texts, aligning more closely with the cultural and literary traditions from which these inscriptions emerge.

Graffiti and Mural Inscriptions: Between Aesthetic Form and Cultural Transgression

Poetic inscriptions on walls represent a prevalent phenomenon across various societal sectors, encompassing both spontaneous and organized acts of drawing or writing. Motivations are diverse, encompassing psychological, social, and involuntary factors, with manifestations that include personal, emotional, social, economic, political, sports-related, religious, and educational dimensions. The methods vary significantly: some illustrate the writer's suffering, nostalgia, or aspiration for fame; others reveal repression, promote products, employ satire, undermine, communicate ideas or information, provide advice or guidance, display calligraphic skill, or represent random, unintended marks. Graffiti utilizes various techniques, including professional calligraphy, machine printing, and amateur methods, such as colored spray, engraving tools, paint, and digital printing.

Murals encompass a wide spectrum of styles, ranging from aesthetically refined and purposeful inscriptions to crude and offensive markings. Present in both Arab and Western cultures, these wall writings convey a variety of

messages—literary, political, economic, social, and emotional. They appear in numerous forms, including handwriting, spray paint, engraving, and other artistic techniques.

However, not all mural expressions contribute positively to the visual landscape. Some feature vulgar, incoherent, or aesthetically displeasing content that offends public taste and undermines cultural values. Such writings may diverge from religious teachings, societal norms, and traditional etiquette. They can serve as outlets for psychological expression, including anger, hatred, or frustration, or may be driven by entertainment motives or illicit purposes, including sexual innuendos or provocations.

These inscriptions appear in a wide array of public and private spaces—on school walls, residential buildings, factories, universities, streets, vehicles, stations, bridges, fences, trees, trains, public restrooms, and abandoned structures. Some are written in colloquial dialects, others in flawed Modern Standard Arabic, and many contain profane or inappropriate language:

- "The school is for sale, and the principal is free".
- "Oh, how beautiful he is—he doesn't have forty!"
- A humorous exchange:
  "Please don't write on the walls".
  Response: "Good news, may you live long!"
- Playful distortions: "Scribble, scribble. To mess up the threads. Drawing on the wall".

Such writings mar public spaces with visual and linguistic degradation, embodying the proverb: "The walls are the planks of the insane".

Figure 1. **A photograph of the interior of the "Ithra" Library showing columns with poetic inscriptions**

Source: Taken by the Author.

The poetry at the walls of "Ithra": The Content and Values

Since its establishment, the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture ("Ithra") has recognized the profound cultural and historical significance of poetry. The library's architectural design embodies this vision by incorporating poetic verses by some of the most distinguished poets in Arabic literary history. These inscriptions, elegantly etched onto the columns, represent a carefully curated selection of works by poets celebrated for their lasting contributions to Arabic literature.

The columns within the "Ithra" Library are not only structurally prominent but artistically expressive. Each floor features uniquely crafted columns, set

amid collections that span thousands of books across diverse fields, as well as audiovisual materials and dedicated exhibition spaces. Over time, these columns have become more than architectural elements—they serve as vessels for the voices of Arabic poetic heritage, enriching the intellectual and aesthetic journey of visitors, scholars, and literary enthusiasts alike.

The concept of inscribing poetry onto columns is deeply rooted in Arab literary tradition. Ibn Qutaybah recounts that the pre-Islamic poet Al-Nabigha Al-Dhubyani was honored with a red leather dome at the renowned Ukaz market, where poets such as Al-A'sha, Hassan ibn Thabit, and Al-Khansaa al-Salamiyya would gather to present their verses for public judgment and acclaim (Qutaybah, 1958). It was in this rich cultural context that Al-Khansaa famously recited (Tammas, 2004):

أَمْ ذرفَتْ إِذْ خَلَتْ مِنْ أَهْلِهَا الدَّارُ؟   قَذًى بِعَيْنِيْك أَمْ بِالْعَيْنِ عُوَّارُ

Is it grit in your eye or the rot of sight?
Did grief pour forth when halls turned ash and their dwellers fled?

The poetess mourns her brother, Sakhr, using visceral imagery of vision and decay to interrogate the nature of her sorrow:

كَأَنَّهُ عَلَمٌ فِي رَأْسِه نَارُ   وَإِنَّ صَخْرًا لَتَأْتَمُّ الْهُدَاةُ بِهِ

Indeed, Sakhr is that rock to which seekers of guidance are drawn,
as if he were a mountain crowned with a blazing light at its summit.

The poetess praises her brother, Sakhr, depicting him as a mountain crowned with a light to guide wayfarers.

Poetry verses on the columns of "Ithra" Library

The "Ithra" Library features over 300,000 printed books in Arabic and English, distributed across four thematic floors: the ground floor is allocated for multimedia resources and the children's library, the second floor features

display screens and a café, while the third floor comprises books on an array of topics, in religious philosophy, ethics, technology, and the arts. The fourth floor encompassed subjects pertaining to history, geography, and encyclopedias.

Figure 2. A photograph from inside the first floor of the "Ithra" Library, with excerpts from modern Arabic poetry

Source: Taken by the Author.

Column poets on the first floor

The first round featured poetic selections from twenty-two prominent contemporary poets. Among them were Elia Abu Madi, Ahmed Shawqi, Hafez Ibrahim, Omar Abu Risha, Ghazi Al-Gosaibi, Muhammad Al-Faytouri, Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab, Salah Abdel-Sabour, Mahmoud Darwish, Nizar Qabbani, Ali Mahmoud Taha, Mahmoud Ghoneim, Muhammad Al-Thubaiti, Nazik Al-Malaika, Jassim Al-Sahih, Khalil Mutran, Al-Akhtal Al-Saghir, Abdullah Al-Faisal, Gibran Khalil Gibran, Abu Al-Qasim Al-Shabi, Muhammad Mahdi Al-Jawahiri, and Ibrahim Naji.

A single poetic line by the poet of love and beauty, Elia Abu Madi (1889–1957 AD), was inscribed on one of the columns on the first floor's wall.

<div dir="rtl">

لَا يَرَى فِي الْوُجُودِ شَيْئًا جَمِيلَا   وَالَّذِي نَفْسُهُ بِغَيْرِ جَمَالٍ

</div>

By the One whose soul is without beauty, nothing in existence appears beautiful.

The poet mentions that only those with a beautiful soul can recognize and feel beauty.

In addition, there is a single verse by the Prince of Poets, Ahmed Shawqi, which has an ethical message:

<div dir="rtl">

فَإِنْ هُمُو ذَهَبَتْ أَخْلَاقُهُمْ ذَهَبُوا   وَإِنَّمَا الْأُمَمُ الْأَخْلَاقُ مَا بَقِيَتْ

</div>

Indeed, nations are nothing but the morals that endure;
For if their morals are lost, then they are lost too.

The poet mentions that morality is the wealth of nations and the address of civilizations, and without morality, nations and civilizations do not exist.

Among the verses is a renowned line by Hafez Ibrahim, conveying an ethical message:

<div dir="rtl">

أَعْدَدْتَ شَعْبًا طَيِّبَ الْأَعْرَاقِ   الْأُمُّ مَدْرَسَةٌ إِذَا أَعْدَدْتَها

</div>

The mother is a school; if you prepare her well,
you prepare a nation of good lineage.

The poet compares the mother to a school that, when adequately prepared, will cultivate a society with high morals.

Column poets on the second floor

The second floor shows the poetic works of thirty poets from both the pre--Islamic and Islamic periods, featuring notable authors such as Ka'b ibn Zuhayr, Al-Khansaa, Al-Nabigha Al-Dhubyani, Al-Harith ibn Hilliza Al--Yashkuri, Ubaid bin Al-Abras, Duraid bin Al-Sammah, Urwa bin Al-Ward, Maan bin Aws, Amr bin Maad Yakrib, and Umayyah bin Abi Al-Salt, among others.

This floor features four columns, each showcasing poetic selections that serve multiple purposes, ranging from praise of the Prophet to elegy and love poetry. On one of the column walls on the second floor—dedicated to poets from the Islamic, Umayyad, and Abbasid periods—a verse by Ka'b ibn Zuhayr, the renowned author of *Al-Burdah*, has been inscribed (Faour, 1997). This particular verse dates back to 26 AH (26 AH = 646 AD).

مُتَيَّمٌ إِثْرَهَا لَمْ يُفْدَ مَكْبُولُ   بَانَتْ سُعَادُ فَقَلْبِي الْيَوْمَ مَتْبُولُ

Su'ad has gone—my heart, a withered bloom,
Love-chained, pursuit unyielding—still in chains.

The poet describes his state of mind following the separation from his beloved Su'ad, that left him in a state of awe. He was akin to a prisoner who was unable to redeem himself.

The second column features Al-Khansaa's renowned verse, in which she laments her brother Sakhr:

كَأَنَّهُ عَلَمٌ فِي رَأْسِهِ نَارُ   وَإِنَّ صَخْرًا لَتَأْتَمُّ الْهُدَاةُ بِهِ

Indeed, Sakhr is that rock to which seekers of guidance are drawn,
as if he were a mountain crowned with a blazing light at its summit.

The poetess praises her brother Sakhr and describes him as a mountain with a light at its summit to guide travelers.

On the third column of the same floor, the famous opening of the poem by Al-Nabigha Al-Dhubyani:

أَقْوَتْ وَطَالَ عَلَيْهَا سَالِفُ الْأَمَدِ   يَا دَارَ مَيَّةَ بِالْعَلْيَاءِ فَالسَّنَدِ

O dwelling of Mayya in the "Al-Aliya" and "Al-Sanad",
It lies empty and the days have lengthened upon it.

The poet calls the homes of his beloved Maya; she used to live in these two places "Al-Aliya" and "Al-Sanad", which have been emptied of their inhabitants by their departure from her and their long separation from her.

On the fourth column of the same floor, the famous opening of the poem of Al-Harith ibn Hilliza Al-Yashkuri:

<div dir="rtl">

رُبَّ ثَاوٍ يُمَلُّ مِنْهُ الثَّوَاءُ   آذَنَتْنَا بِبَيْنِهَا أَسْمَاءُ

</div>

Asmaa has appraised me of her intention of departing our camp;
A place may grow weary of its dwellers,
But I always appreciated Asmaa's presence and never wanted her to go.

He tells the poet that Asma has left them, and expresses his sadness for her departure, as he does not get bored of her stay even if it is long (Masoud, 2025).

This verse may be critiqued for its linguistic complexity; however, its historical and cultural significance cannot be dismissed. It represents a foundational element of Arab literary heritage and serves as the opening line of a renowned poem widely acknowledged by scholars of classical Arabic literature. While it may not be familiar to the general public, its inclusion underscores the depth and richness of the tradition it represents.

Column poets on the third floor

The third floor featured poetic verses from thirteen distinguished poets of the Umayyad, Abbasid, and Andalusian periods. Among them were Al--Mutanabbi, Abu Tammam, Al-Buhturi, Jarir, Bashar Ibn Burd, Abu Al-Atahiya, Al-Farazdaq, Abu Nuwas, Ibn Zaydun, Abu Al-Alaa Al-Ma'arri, Lisan al-Din Ibn al-Khatib, Imam Al-Shafi'i, and Ibn al-Rumi. With the inclusion of these poets, the total number represented in the library rose to 65—corresponding to the number of columns dedicated to poetic inscriptions across the first three floors. The fourth floor, however, contains no inscriptions, as it was deemed unsuitable for writing.

A verse by the esteemed Arab poet Al-Mutanabbi (303–354 AH) was inscribed on the first wall of the columns on the third floor (Al-Barqouki, 1986).

أَعَزُّ مَكَانٍ فِي الدُّنَا سَرْجُ سَابِحٍ   وَخَيْرُ جَلِيسٍ فِي الزَّمَانِ كِتَابُ

The most exalted place in the lifetime is the saddle of a swift horse,
And the finest companion in all times is a book.

Al-Mutanabbi says that a horse's saddle is the highest and most honorable place, because when a person rides a horse, he fights and defeats his enemies. Al-Mutanabbi describes a book as the best and most valuable friend a person can have, as it offers many benefits and never harms its owner.

This particular verse of poetry holds notable significance within the library, as it is often referenced in literary discourse and serves to promote the value of reading and the pursuit of knowledge. Its message aligns closely with the library's mission, making it a fitting choice for placement on the first wall. The second column features a verse by Abu Tammam, taken from the opening lines of a poem that commemorates the Battle of Amorium—a pivotal event in Islamic history:

السَّيْفُ أَصْدَقُ أَنْبَاءً مِنَ الْكُتُبِ   فِي حَدِّهِ الْحَدُّ بَيْنَ الْجِدِّ وَاللَّعِبِ

The sword's tells truer tales than books do,
Its cutting edge draws the line between earnestness and jest.

The poet extols the virtues of fortitude and demonstrates that the sword is more accurate than the predictions of astrologers and their books; its razor--sharp edge distinguishes truth from superstition.

A renowned verse by Al-Buhturi, frequently recited during spring's arrival, is featured in the third column. This verse encourages reflection and optimism regarding nature and existence:

أَتَاكَ الرَّبِيعُ الطَّلْقُ يَخْتَالُ ضَاحِكًا   مِنَ الْحُسْنِ حَتَّى كَادَ أَنْ يَتَكَلَّمَا

Spring has come to you, free and radiant,
Its loveliness so vivid, it almost seems to speak.

Al-Buhturi observes that the delightful spring season has arrived, bringing with it the splendor of nature, which he likens to a man striding confidently, filled with laughter.

The fourth column features a verse of poetry regarding love, referenced in romantic relationships, albeit extracted from a satirical poem by Jarir:

قَتَلْنَنَا ثُمَّ لَمْ يُحْيِينَ قَتْلَانَا   إِنَّ الْعُيُونَ الَّتِي فِي طَرْفِهَا حَوَرٌ

Eyes with brightness in their glance have slain us,
Yet they didn't revive our killed ones.

The poet describes eyes that possess an alluring beauty, often interpreted as having a striking contrast between the whiteness and the deep blackness of the iris. He laments the fact that these captivating eyes have figuratively "killed" him with their beauty, but they do not "revive" those they have killed, highlighting the enduring impact of their allure.

Additionally, several pillars on the second floor are dedicated to poets from the pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods. One prominent pillar in the library features a Qur'anic verse, an exalted pronouncement from God Almighty (The Clear Quran, 2016):

Say, O Prophet, "If the ocean were ink for writing the Words of my Lord, it would certainly run out before the Words of my Lord were finished, even if We refilled it with its equal".

No matter how many poets compose verses or how eloquent their discourse, their expressions can never replicate the structure, style, or language of the Holy Qur'an. The Divine Book stands alone in its sublimity, perfection, coherence, eloquence, and miraculous nature—qualities that continue to inspire awe and unify hearts across generations.

Conclusion

While the "Ithra" Library's poetic inscriptions are impressive in scope, notable gaps remain. Several prominent poets who made significant contributions to Arabic literature are absent from the columns, including Antarah Ibn Shaddad, Abu Firas Al-Hamdani, and Abdullah Al-Bardouni, among others. Despite their literary excellence and enduring popularity, these figures are not represented.

Furthermore, the selection does not fully reflect the range of metrical patterns and tonal variation found in Arabic poetry, revealing a lack of stylistic diversity across the inscriptions.

The library comprises a total of 66 columns. One is dedicated to a Qur'anic verse highlighting the infinite nature of God's words. The remaining 65 feature poetic verses drawn from across the Arabic poetic tradition. Of these, 30 are from pre-Islamic, early Islamic, and classical poets; 13 from the Umayyad, Abbasid, and Andalusian periods; and 22 from the modern era. This distribution positions the library as a near-comprehensive poetic archive—what could be considered a "library of poetry".

Some inscriptions, however, contain minor linguistic and grammatical errors. For example, in a verse by Bashar, the presence of nunation in the word "sometimes" is incorrect; the proper form should retain the alif without nunation. Similarly, in a verse attributed to Abu Al-Alaa Al-Ma'arri, the word "laughing" is inaccurately vocalized with a fatha on the letter *kaf*, when it should be read with a kasra. Another instance involves Ibn al-Rumi's use of *Malik* with nunation, whereas it should appear without it. Notably, many columns display verses on opposite sides by different poets—for instance, Ahmed Shawqi on one side and Hafez Ibrahim on the other.

The modern-era poets featured in the collection represent various Arab nations. From Lebanon, Elia Abu Madi and Gibran Khalil Gibran; from Palestine, Mahmoud Darwish; and from Syria, Nizar Qabbani and Omar Abu Risha. Tunisia is represented by Abu Al-Qasim Al-Shabi, while Sudanese poet Muhammad Al-Faytouri is also included. Saudi Arabia is represented by poets such as Jassim Al-Sahih and Ghazi Al-Gosaibi. Iraq contributes notable figures like Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab, Nazik Al-Malaika, and Muhammad Mahdi Al-Jawahiri. Egypt's representation includes Ahmed Shawqi, Salah Abdel-Sabour, Mahmoud Ghoneim, Hafez Ibrahim, and Ali Mahmoud Taha.

Despite this regional variety, poets from numerous Arab countries—such as Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Somalia, the Comoros, Jordan, Yemen, and Djibouti—are notably absent. Furthermore, while the eras covered span the pre-Islamic, early Islamic, Umayyad, Abbasid, Andalusian, and modern periods, other significant historical stages remain unrepresented. There are no

inscriptions from the Ayyubid period, which featured poets like Ibn Al-Farid, nor from the Fatimid period, which produced poets such as Sharif Al-Murtada and Amara Al-Yemeni. The Kharijite tradition, with figures like Qatari Ibn Al-Fuja'ah, and the Mamluk period, represented by Al-Busiri and Safi Al-Din Al-Hilli, are also missing. Likewise, the Ottoman-era poets, including Ibn Maatouq Al-Musawi and Abdul-Ghani Al-Nabulsi, as well as Sufi poets like Al-Hallaj and Ibn Arabi, are excluded.

Moreover, many renowned poets whose reputations are equal to—or exceed—those who were included are notably absent. These include Omar Ibn Abi Rabi'ah, Al-Sharif Al-Radi, Abu Al-Baqa' Al-Rundi, Ibn Hamdis, Ibn Khafaja, Al-Mu'tamid Ibn Abbad, Mahmoud Sami Al-Baroudi, and others. The selection lacks balance in terms of poetic schools, voices, and aesthetic approaches, leading to a relative uniformity in tone and form.

Despite these shortcomings, the "Ithra" Library stands as a model cultural institution, not only within Saudi Arabia but across the Arab world. Its curatorial vision avoids a centralized or bureaucratic approach, embracing a broader Arab identity by including poets from Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria, among others, rather than limiting its scope to local or Gulf writers.

Unlike random graffiti that appears on public walls without intent or purpose, the inscriptions at "Ithra" were carefully curated. Each verse was deliberately chosen and artistically presented to foster both visual engagement and intellectual reflection. The result is a thoughtful and purposeful integration of poetic heritage into architectural space.

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Can Theology Save the Academy? Exploring the Role of Theology in the Crisis of the Humanities –and the University Itself

Abstract: A growing chorus of informed voices is lamenting the dire state of universities around the world, with many worrying negative symptoms. The question arises to what extent this perceived crisis could be linked to the progressive secularisation of academia in recent times, and to what extent we can identify its 'malaise' with the absence of religious inspiration and support. This thesis needs further analysis and could be justified after some analogy with the so-called "malaise of modernity". The article proposes a more active role for theology in universities as a way to provide meaning, purpose and hope; as a wisdom to educate how to believe; as an instance of respect for human dignity and rights; and as a way to assist in coping, resilience and flourishing for all sectors involved in this educational project.

Keywords: secularization, modernity, cultural malaise, believing, resilience

Introduction

It is commonplace to speak of the "crisis of universities" or the many challenges they face worldwide due to various factors: financial pressures, declining social recognition, demographic shifts, questions of perceived utility, ideological influences, and political interests. This perception has become even more pronounced in recent months, as universities in many countries have become contested spaces marked by protests, grievances, and ideological clashes. Recent events in some nations have further positioned universities as victims of growing polarization and political interference—forces that often have little to do with their fundamental mission of pursuing truth and educating future generations.

A quick scan of Internet search engines reveals a gloomy picture in many Western countries, with worrying symptoms ranging from low funding to low standards, low enrolment and the closure of many colleges and universities. The situation seems to be even more critical in the USA, in a system that makes higher education very expensive, leads to high levels of indebtedness for most students, and is subject to many pressures from different sectors that are debating its identity and usefulness in societies that value only some practical results and uses.

The crisis is even more acute when we think about the humanities. Many universities are closing down entire departments of these studies, which are now seen as redundant and useless in the new economic panorama; the humanities can even be seen as cases of cultural disruption. It is a dismaying situation as we follow the fate of many humanities in colleges and universities unable to appreciate their value and important contribution to the holistic education of new generations (Donoghue, 2008; Jay, 2014; Reitter & Wellmon, 2021).

It is likely that the perceived crisis runs deeper, and that the aforementioned problems are merely symptoms of a more radical malaise. Indeed, it is not too risky to extend the title of the 'malaise of modernity' to the university realm, perhaps as a particular setting, where such a structural illness or existential crisis afflicts an institution that is supposed to represent—in some sense— the best of the modern project of universal education and the raising of cultural standards as a means of promoting general well-being and prosperity. In other words, the perceived crisis of the university system reveals an unease with the modern programme of social and cultural progress, a failure to deliver the promised goods in a problematic context, and a high degree of uncertainty about the proper role such institutions should play in advanced societies and highly technologically driven cultures.

Dealing with the current crisis requires a good diagnosis of the causes of such weakness and decline, as a first step that would lead to better solutions and ways to address the current discontent. It is clear that this is a complex phenomenon and that its causes cannot be reduced to a single factor, such as financial neglect or ideological vagaries. A first task is to better describe and analyse the factors involved, a task that has already yielded good insights. However, this article introduces a thesis that has been less considered or taken into account: that this crisis is, among other things, a late consequence of the long process of secularisation that has affected most Western societies, leading to a loss of religious reference and a deep "disenchantment" in Weberian terms—with higher education, which loses its soul and becomes merely a professional activity or even a technical function aimed at providing experts to manage well-functioning social systems.

In recent years more and more voices have been raised about the need for theology to "save medicine", or even to save democracy as a system, or

to support sustainable lifestyles and social models. It is an open question to what extent a similar proposition can be made about higher education, i.e. that only theology can save it from losing its soul. The big issue at stake in many Western societies is that it is becoming increasingly obvious that the absence of religion, the inability to transcend, to provide resilient meaning and hope, is at the root of many social and personal pathologies and limitations that until recently were simply ignored, because the negative effects of such a deficit were less perceptible before, when we could presumably still enjoy some rents from the faith of other generations. As we reach a critical mass of low religious belief and practice, these negative effects become more apparent and the risks more threatening.

The following pages attempt to develop the proposed thesis. The first section will explore the causes of the perceived crisis, and the extent to which we can link the malaise of higher education to a loss of religious reference or to the deep secularisation of universities. The next section will attempt to be more constructive, suggesting the role that Christian faith and theology can play and contribute to addressing some of the challenges now perceived, in order to promote a different model of university, capable of providing much needed functions beyond the technical. This proposal, however, raises the question of what kind of theology would be appropriate in this context?

What went wrong with universities?

I am probably taking a risky step in linking the two crises: the fairly well-trodden intellectual path leading to the emergence of critical and deeply disappointing aspects of modernity, and the newly perceived problems of higher education. To some extent, the connection could be seen as too obvious or ignored: since universities are a vital element of the modern project of universal education for the general betterment of humanity, the crisis of modernity would be reflected or projected in the crisis of these educational institutions. However, this is not a necessary consequence; indeed, some modern institutions, such as scientific research or the welfare state, appear to be functioning reasonably well, despite

a less encouraging framework and, again, in the midst of many complaints. Indeed, until recently the system of higher education in most Western societies could be regarded as one of the best achievements of modern times, even though its origins date back to the Middle Ages. There is some debate about when the first signs of dissatisfaction began, or even whether it is a legitimate complaint; indeed, we find studies on the "crisis of the university" for at least four decades (Karnoouh, 1989; Amaral & Magalhães, 2003; Scott, 2018; Cook, 2021). It seems that the perception of "crisis" is intrinsic to the university universe, an endless condition due to its own quality as a centre of research, innovation and experimentation (Tight, 2024). It is difficult to assess the extent to which the pessimistic mood has increased significantly in recent years, feeding a sense of failure and a certain soul-searching, leading to calls for deep review and urgent reform (Christopherson et al., 2014; Thompsett, 2021; Ling & Livingston, 2023; Nehring, 2024; Woods, 2024; Bogost, 2025).

Descriptions of the crisis in higher education point to different causes and factors, and it is therefore important to pay attention to these different scenarios in order to avoid confusion, even if in more cases these factors seem to be quite intertwined. To summarise, the crisis is mainly linked to the following factors:

- Financial or economic, as many questions arise about the current models, such as: the involvement of public investment and its accountability, or the policies to avoid some excesses or wasteful spending; the huge costs for many students and their indebtedness; the big business associated with some models of higher education; and now more about the dramatic cuts this system is undergoing in several countries.
- Organisational issues, due to a change of model, moving to a more managerial and effective organisation, less aimed at improving wisdom and research, and more aimed at achieving a successful balance sheet. A similar case arises when these organisations need to adapt to new contexts of massive demand and delivery of required skills, assuming a more market-like mentality.
- Crisis of legitimacy and confidence, as more and more people mistrust the functions and performance of universities as institutions

providing quality education that contributes to the common progress of society, and the perception that universities are failing in their main mission of preparing skilled professionals able to face the challenges of all their professional and life circumstances (Brown, 2024).

- Ideological crisis, due to the perceived drift in many universities towards radical positions on political and social issues, often at odds with the majority of the population and its interests, raising critical questions about freedom of expression, the limits of inclusiveness and the underlying values that should inspire and support decision-makers and curricula.

- Crisis of interest and attendance, according to some data, students are attending less and less, showing an increasing sense of disengagement and discouraging professors and the entire system, which is resentful of such unblemished disaffection (Moores et al., 2019; Otte, 2024).

- Crisis of values, as many voices point to a profound change in recent decades, when the university ceases to be an institution that aims to "form character" and transmit values, and becomes merely a "knowledge factory" aimed at providing experts for positions in many economic sectors and industries (Donoghue, 2008; Arthur, 2024).

- The impact of new technologies, an aspect that has become increasingly evident in recent years, as the development of intelligent systems provides very efficient tools for education, sometimes overlapping and competing with traditional education systems, thus revealing their limitations.

This list can be extended to include the complaints and grievances of staff, teachers and other stakeholders; the catalogue can be expanded to include the precariousness of many positions for young professors or their low expectations of promotion. In any case, the aim of the former list is not to scare people about how bad things are, but to start from a certain awareness of the current state of affairs and to make a more accurate diagnosis of what is wrong with the current situation, in order to move towards attempts to remedy the perceived problems.

As noted above, this list does not include as part of the problem the "secularisation of the academy" that has been described in several studies in recent decades (Marsden & Longfield, 1992; Altschuler, 1994; Flatt, 2020). Indeed, it is not easy to assess the extent to which the two processes are related: the loss of religious profile and the perceived multiple crises in universities. It could just be a coincidence or, to use a rather minimal description borrowed from Max Weber, just an "elective affinity" between the two historical dynamics. To suggest a correlation seems more risky and even one-sided or reductive. The thesis put forward here is that progressive secularisation could have a negative impact on the way universities have developed in recent decades. This thesis runs counter to the received wisdom, which asserts the healthy and progressive consequences of a process of differentiation and autonomy, which allows the development of institutions aimed at cultivating education and research without interference from other social systems, and even less from religious tutelage, censure or control.

The big question now is to what extent this process can be seen as a gain or a loss, taking into account the many factors and issues involved. The answer probably needs to be more nuanced, distinguishing between positive and negative aspects of this process of differentiation. Something similar can be assumed from other social systems, such as the health care system, where some gains have been made from breaking with religious traditions and guardianship in medical practice, while at the same time we can perceive some losses or dysfunctions due to the lack of religious or spiritual reference in care activities.

The first point is not new. Max Weber, at the beginning of the twentieth century, was already able to complain about the negative consequences of the secularisation process, which he had already observed as something inevitable and a destiny of Western societies; his point was that we pay a price for the economic, scientific and technical progress we are experiencing, a price we feel more in existential terms, but that is the other side of the modern condition. The secularisation of the higher education system in most Western societies, even in religious universities, which can hardly escape this universal trend, is taken for granted, and is seen as progress in contrast to earlier times.

The negative consequences of this move have mostly been ignored or considered secondary to the great advantages that can be found in the secular model of higher education.

The malaise of modernity and the malaise of university

This is a slightly original point: we are well aware of a long intellectual tradition that has exposed the faults, abuses and problems of modernity. Some of them are all too obvious, given the historical record: very destructive wars, terrible forms of social engineering, the annihilation of entire populations... Awareness of the dark side of modernity is nothing new, but an exercise that began quite early. The Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski gave a significant title to an important book, *Modernity on Endless Trial* (Kołakowski, 1990). He used the term 'malaise' several times to describe the current situation more than 30 years ago. A year later, Charles Taylor published a book with the evocative title *The Malaise of Modernity* (Taylor, 1991). They were by no means the only ones; several years earlier, the American sociologist Peter L. Berger was raising similar issues (Berger 1974). We can even speak of a literary and philosophical genre that has produced many titles in recent decades. In many cases, the problem is the lack of normativity and values, or even the nihilism that results from such an emancipatory movement. This is a motif that has been present in modern times at least since Nietzsche, through Max Weber, the thinkers of the Frankfurt School, the French New Philosophers, many postmodern thinkers, and finds another radical expression in the critical analysis of theologians like John Milbank (1990). The result is always the same: a perceived void and the inability of modern means to replace religion—Christian faith, to be precise—as a provider of values, moral guidance, motivation, resilience and hope. The institutions that have grown up and become more characteristic of the modern age—the political state, the liberal economy, science, the legal system or even the health system—would be quite incapable of providing the functions and services formerly associated with religion and its rituals or practices. The expected self-correcting

function of social systems, which would find the anti-bodies for their own illness or develop solutions in an evolutionary and adaptive way, are in these studies denounced as unconvincing and insufficient.

The situation of general crisis described above is by no means the only currency in the Western cultural milieu, as many other proposals and developments could reveal the opposite tendency: an undiminished faith in progress, in human capacities, in the expectation of human moral improvement, and in science and new technologies capable of solving every problem and overcoming every challenge we humans face. Adaptability and survival in new environments could be the rule, as it has often been in the past, and it should not be the exception now. This is a controversial and difficult issue to resolve: to what extent secularisation leads to very negative consequences in terms of anomy, disorientation, lack of control and hope; and to what extent this is a price worth paying, given the enormous benefits we could enjoy by getting rid of religion and its heavy tutelage. This is a point made very explicitly by Charles Taylor in his magnum opus *A Secular Age* (2007): the general perception associated with a secular culture is that it is better to avoid religious references and dependencies in order to pursue and live a fulfilling life. It is what he calls the "subtraction thesis": if we subtract religion from the social fabric, things will stay the same or even get better.

The question of the negative consequences of the modern secularisation process has been further explored and in recent years has found new, even alarming, expression. The general question is whether the price is becoming too high and whether we can even survive or achieve a sustainable standard of living without any religious reference. This point becomes more acute in areas such as medicine and health care, where some voices ask whether theology is the only instance that could save medicine (Nissen, 2014; Ranganathan, 2017). The question appears in a more demanding way with regard to the democratic system, as a threatened model and in danger of deteriorating if a balanced Christian faith disappears. It is noteworthy that, in recent months, various essays have registered this alarm: without the right religion, democracy is at high risk (French & Rauch, 2024; Rosa, 2024; Short, 2025).

In broad strokes, we can observe a certain correlation between the increase in perceived threats and uncertainty and a renewed demand for religion. This is

a point that could be expected from the theoretical framework of Niklas Luhmann and his social systems theory (Luhmann, 1977): since the function of religion is identified with coping with unmanageable contingency and uncertainty, then it is to be expected that as the level of contingency—or uncontrollable risk—increases, religious function and performance will be more in demand as a way of filling in gaps or ensuring a minimum of certainty and hope, or limiting the damage associated with this excess of contingency and complexity. Something similar is happening now with the rise of intelligent systems, which could pose an existential threat, as many alarmist voices remind us (Harari, 2024). These last events seem to close a circle that began as a process of modern emancipation, leading to a deliberate disengagement from religion, and a new awareness of the growing bad consequences of this move, inviting a remedy and a better articulation of religion and the other social systems to avoid the worst.

Once these points have been made, and the open questions about the contested role of religion in advanced secular societies have been addressed, attention has turned to higher education and its own secularisation. This is a point which has already been analysed (Marsden & Longfield, 1992; Altschuler, 1994; Flatt, 2020), and which affects even Catholic colleges and universities (McIntire, 2008). This is an obvious point, which in most cases is taken as a normal consequence of the modernisation and differentiation of an institution born within a Christian framework and model. It is less clear, however, to what extent the perceived "malaise of the university", which may well correlate with that perceived in modern society in general, or even more so in areas such as politics and culture, is related to the progressive absence of religious communication or explicit reference to transcendence. In fact, it is much more difficult to identify a Luhmannian rule in this context: to what extent the perception of new uncertainties and symptoms of deep crises could trigger a "religious search" or a need for alternative resources capable of providing some resilience to this particular and very sensitive social system.

A further "technical" cause can be added to the catalogue described: contemporary science and research have been driven by a reductivist attitude that has rendered obsolete or redundant the reference to traditional religious motives or reasons. Since science works better by applying a reductive model

and seeking parsimony, the religious dimension is better dropped as unnecessary and even inconvenient to better explain natural and social processes. Some criticism has already been voiced against this attitude, as Steven Horst denounces that "being reduced" carries negative connotations and reveals a cognitive style that could sacrifice many aspects involved in any process in the expectation of gaining a more accurate insight (Horst, 2007). However, this approach runs the risk of ignoring the complexity of factors involved in human and social phenomena. Such a cognitive and scientific style could also contribute to alienating religion from academia and rendering it irrelevant in higher education.

Obviously, some of the causes of the described crisis have very little to do with any religious absence, such as the important financial issues affecting the sustainability of these institutions. However, other issues, such as the perceived loss of public confidence, the disaffection of many students, or the perception of a useless organisation, are probably more related to a loss of balance in social values and preferences, and the way in which societies could recognise the merits of higher education, and even more so of the humanities, with all the investment required to keep it functioning.

What can do theology to assist and remedy in all this mess?

The question at the beginning of this section might seem rather rhetorical in the midst of the perceived chaos and uncertainty that afflicts higher education. Theology plays a minimal role in this very advanced system, and its presence is usually marginal, on the fringes of campuses—if it is there at all—and in most cases completely absent or ignored. Probably, theology shares a similar fate with the other humanities, a family to which it belongs and where the analysis could start, since both realities run in parallel: the rejection of theology and the deep crisis felt by the humanities.

The particular case of the humanities and its crisis is quite paradigmatic. Some recent books expose this case and the negative consequences of

such a trend. Willem Drees, for example, offers a fine analysis that serves as a vindication of these disciplines (Drees, 2021). His main point is that the main function of the humanities is to give meaning to people's lives, their relationships and our history, a function that is absolutely necessary and even more so in these critical times. This function is less likely to be fulfilled by science and technology, and it is in the area covered by the humanities that it can flourish and work better. The weakness that we perceive in the humanities could be attributed to many developments in this field, since several studies, under the influence of postmodern programmes, could contest even the search for truth as a vain effort, emptying these disciplines of any strong mission in the new context.

The pressing question now is what theology has to do with all this gloomy panorama. Certainly, the humanities stand or fall with theology and religion. Since theology is at the heart of the humanities, but has suffered a steady erosion even in this academic field, we might be justified in thinking that a complete secularisation of the academy, a total absence of religion, will threaten the rest of the humanities and any programme aimed at helping people to understand themselves and others better, or to find meaning and purpose. It is interesting to assess the extent to which the crisis of theology and the study of religion in modern universities is only the first symptom of a global crisis affecting all the humanities, and how such a process could trigger a general crisis of meaning that would affect—and is affecting—the whole of the academy. Indeed, this lack of meaning is clearly visible among those students who are abandoning the classroom, who see attending classes as a waste of time and energy; all they are looking for is a degree that might give them a few more chances of getting a better-paid—or less tiring—job.

Perhaps I am expecting too much from theology in developing this thesis. The idea that the rejection of theology is at the heart of the crisis in the humanities, and that this is at the heart of the dismal state of higher education, could be seen as an exaggeration or an exercise in over-estimating theology, which is usually a much more modest enterprise and does not pretend to be the key to solving all these difficult problems. Other factors, however, can help to focus the question of this role and to give the theological profession more self-respect.

To begin with, the ambition described—to endow theology with a great responsibility to address major challenges in several social systems, including higher education—may recall a rather famous and enigmatic fable by the German philosopher Walter Benjamin, who, not far from his dramatic death during the Second World War, proposed the image of a dwarf hidden under a chess table where an automaton was apparently moving the pieces; in fact, it was the dwarf who was highly skilled at the game, and who could see the moves and move the pieces himself in order to defeat any opponent. Curiously, Benjamin associated this hidden figure with theology, attributing to it the unusual function of inspiring and enforcing a historical materialist programme of social progress (De Cauter, 2018).

Obviously, this image, which is more than 80 years old and was produced in a different context of deep social and historical crisis, can hardly serve as a guide for dealing with our current challenges. It can only function as a literary figure or an inspirational motif, with a very limited range. In any case, it is interesting that some critical thinkers can sometimes remind us how important theology can become in highly threatened contexts. The examples cited of theology being called upon to save medicine are just one example. The voices calling for religion to save democracy could be understood in a similar way, since theological discernment is most needed to address very complex issues related to the role of religion, or rather Christian faith, in our troubled times.

In any case, we can go one step further and try to find out what specific functions theology—as the reflective dimension of religion—could provide to meet the challenges described, especially those in the academy. My proposals should be linked to the earlier analysis of the humanities as providers of meaning or general guides, an endeavour that requires some further points of attention. The first, in my view, is to help in the difficult process of forming beliefs, the right ones; the second is related to the issue of preserving human dignity and rights; and the third service expected of theology is to help in providing a clear path to personal and social well-being, including the ability to cope and gain resilience to adversity.

Theology and meaning

The general framework for better understanding the role I am trying to assign to theology in saving the academy is that assigned to the humanities as purveyors of meaning in a context threatened by nihilism. In this case, theology must take on a clear format as a reflection on the ultimate meaning of everything, or on what is more important, more cherished, more valued for us at any given time. It is about the ultimate value we give to our lives, our activities and our society. Doing theology should be recognised as an activity aimed at discerning such ultimate value in more dimensions, which is clearly related to truth, to goodness and even to the pursuit of beauty and happiness. Different religious traditions offer different approaches to addressing and answering the central question: how we can live our lives in a way that we find fulfilling; and how we can design our societies and world in a way that makes them a better place and the right framework for human flourishing (Park, 2013; Oviedo, 2019).

Recent versions of religious vitalism, such as that proposed by Gavin Flood (2019), provide an excellent motivation in this case. This is because religions are described in terms of a constant pursuit of life or life fulfilment. Flood describes the role of religion in promoting civilisation, channeling and managing vital energy, and how both—religion and civilisation—become the basis for achieving better living conditions for all. This is an interesting suggestion as meaning can be clearly linked to the ability to promote life and—as Flood states—to heal the wounds of life. Becoming an instance of living life in its better forms and expressions is very close to providing meaning and purpose, to revealing a worthy living existence.

Theology—framed in these clues—becomes a reflection and a research programme aimed at developing the best means and strategies to overcome the negative aspects that threaten meaningfulness and to reach the highest levels of vitality. In this sense, and in connection with higher education, theology becomes a "school of life" in which students learn how to live their own lives in the most fruitful and fulfilling way, providing higher ideals and nourishing the best expectations for right flourishing.

Theology as a teacher of right believing

In order to achieve the ambitious programme just described, theology must focus on some specific tasks. The first has to do with the question of faith and the process of believing. In our cultural panorama we have a problem with the right acquisition of beliefs, and theology can help to solve it. Indeed, it is clear that many aspects of life and social systems are based on commonly shared beliefs (Fuentes, 2019). But it is also clear to what extent these same systems are suffering from a threatening erosion of these supporting beliefs, rendering these same systems unstable and somewhat illegitimate. This is clear with democracy, when fewer people believe that it could be the best or most functional system of government. Lack of faith or confidence undermines the health system, the education system and even the system that governs personal relationships. The same process certainly affects the university and even science, which is losing confidence from some big sectors of society (New Humanist, 2024).

The topic of beliefs and believing processes has been the subject of intense multidisciplinary research in recent years (Angel et al., 2017). Current studies combine epistemology, cognitive psychology, and even computer science to better understand how beliefs are formed, stabilise, persist or decay, and eventually die out, in a way that reminds us of evolutionary and adaptive processes. We have the means and the tools to better understand this process, and we are aware of the normative aspects involved (Chrisman, 2022). The question for us, once we recognise the importance of beliefs and their inescapable role; and once we accept the emerging crisis that demands correction and normativity to avoid their vagaries and worst expressions; is to what extent theology can contribute to this task.

An interesting answer to this question is provided by Alister McGrath's recent book, *Why We Believe* (2025), in which beliefs—and especially religious beliefs—are defended as sources of meaning and are needed to fill the many gaps left by a culture overconfident in science and modern ideologies. Theology is needed most of all, and even more so in the university context, to assist in the formation of right beliefs. Theologians have a long tradition in the study

of faith and the right way to believe, having become aware of many excesses and unbalanced ways. In any case, for theology, the formation of beliefs is closely related to the possibility of pursuing ideals of truth and virtue; it is not some abstract or unrelated cognitive feature, but one that has very practical consequences and needs to be directed towards these practical ends: believing in order to grow, or believing in order to achieve a better life for all—not just for one person. It is suggested that theology can make such a connection and such an alignment better than any other discipline.

The point is that the process of believing is not just a matter of estimating probabilities or seeking what might be close to certainty. Very often such calculations are rather difficult to make, or to reach a level of certainty that is justified by good testimony and some evidence. In the limit, the question of beliefs, and even more so those that are more crucial, such as our ultimate values, is less about logical discernment or rational estimation, and more about systems that offer real meaning and hope for all, far from reductive and flawed but very seductive proposals. Theology can do a good job and help in this area.

Theology supporting human dignity

This is another point closely related to the provision of meaning and to believing. Indeed, we may more or less believe that human persons are endowed with freedom, inalienable dignity and rights. The extent to which Christian faith and theology can contribute to supporting and enforcing such beliefs and to fostering a sense of respect for the human person is open to debate (Oviedo, 2025). What is beyond doubt for many of us is that we can hardly design a programme for the university as a formative space that ignores this priority: to contribute to the recognition of a high value of the human person that inspires any charter of rights, including those that could become more sensitive in this particular environment.

Theology can provide a good foundation and motivation in this area. It is clear that theology is not the only authority or stakeholder in this controversial area of human rights. However, my suspicion is that the disappearance of theological reference would make the task of dealing with new proposals or charters of rights much more difficult and cumbersome (Pocar, 2015). Finally,

Christian faith provides a ground for maintaining and developing human rights because it anchors human dignity and rights in a doctrine or deep conviction that conceives of human beings as intimately related to God, which is the highest we can conceive of the human condition, i.e. that it is deeply rooted in the divine. We are talking about a set of mutually reinforcing beliefs that make it possible to construct a model of meaning and humanity that should be the basis for all intellectual development and scientific research. This model can motivate a renewal of the University, its identity and its mission.

Theology, coping and wellbeing

The final specification concerns the ability of theology to provide means to achieve greater coping, resilience and flourishing in this often harsh milieu, or to prevent the banalisation of college and university life. This is a well-researched area, pointing to the positive effects in coping with adversity and crisis, gaining resilience, providing meaning and achieving wellbeing (Jones, 2004). For those familiar with the many struggles that both faculty and students face, sometimes due to very difficult and unmanageable demands and pressures, including some levels of failure and personal crisis, religious faith and theology clearly play a positive role in assisting in these difficult cases.

In this context, theology can be seen as an academic activity with a very practical scope: to help everyone to cope better with their challenges, to overcome the worst experiences that are quite common in this highly competitive and stressful environment. In this way, theology contributes to a healthy model that can help in the many struggles and difficulties. It is interesting and highly relevant that the prestigious journal *Nature* has launched a new call for papers entitled "The development, maintenance, and treatment of student mental health difficulties" (Mental Health Research, 2025); or that another journal could ask in an editorial "Student mental health and well-being: are universities doing enough?" (Barrett & Twycross, 2020; see also: Abrams, 2022).

In my opinion, one missing pillar that contributes to mental health is religious belief. However, many studies have shown that not every form of religion works equally well in this case and in this particular context. Since

the university is—or should be—an environment of high intellectual standards, we can expect religious proposals to reach such an intellectual level that they can meet the demands of those who are better educated, and this is something that requires much more theology, not just a simple chaplaincy. I am not sure that this is an issue that requires only a greater presence of professional psychological care and therapy; theology can be very helpful in this task and can make a difference.

Concluding remarks

This article has proposed a way of critically reviewing the many voices that complain of a dire state of affairs in universities around the world and its many causes. It has then developed an analysis that seeks to identify secularisation, or the lack of religious reference, as the cause of some forms of malaise in higher education, a malaise that could be linked to other perceived forms of 'modernity malaise'. The search for secularisation as the culprit is likely to reveal only a limited aspect of a much larger and more complex situation, with all the many factors involved. I have only tried to sketch out an analysis that offers a remedy for many of these problems by bringing theology into the equation and considering its functions and performance as a guiding and reflecting instance for religious faith. This may seem an overly bold claim, and one that is difficult to justify in the present circumstances. It is not a question of reclaiming ecclesiastical authority in university affairs, but of restoring a proper balance between the extremes of the complete absence of religion in the academic world, its total subtraction; and an excess of interference and involvement by religious bodies in research or university management. Perhaps we can find a way of activating the positive function of religion in this particular area or social subsystem without incurring an excess of external and dysfunctional control.

At the moment this is little more than a thesis with very limited evidence. However, just as a personal anecdote, my own experience at one of the finest universities in the world, Oxford, which I visit frequently, is that it is strangely

one of the places with the most vibrant Christian expressions, even a kind of revival that can be perceived at several levels, including the beautiful and deeply spiritual evensongs performed in several colleges' chapels. In this context, it is worth noting that this University sometimes still counts on a theological expert to address and discuss very crucial questions, such as "what is life", as happened last February in a public colloquium at the Sheldonian Theatre (University of Oxford, 2025). All is not lost!

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Between the Systemic Revolution and the Stagnation of Structures: The Evolution of University Identity in a Technological Era

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Abstract: The establishment of the University of Opole in 1994 marked a pivotal moment in Polish higher education, symbolizing a shift from ideological control to intellectual autonomy. This article examines the broader implications of university evolution in an era where technology increasingly dictates academic priorities. Historically, universities balanced humanistic inquiry with scientific progress, yet today, they face existential challenges as private institutions dominate research.

The article explores how the University of Opole's post-communist transformation parallels modern struggles between institutional stagnation and technological disruption. The marginalization of the humanities, once enforced by political regimes, is now driven by technological determinism, raising critical questions about the role of philosophy, ethics, and spirituality in academia. The rise of neurofeedback and biofeedback technologies as substitutes for traditional theological reflection further underscores this shift.

Additionally, universities now contend with corporate research institutions, which, armed with financial and technological superiority, redefine knowledge production. This article argues that unless universities reclaim their role as centers of ethical and interdisciplinary inquiry, they risk obsolescence. The University of Opole's experience serves as a case study for understanding how academic institutions must navigate ideological and technological shifts to maintain their relevance.

Ultimately, the future of universities hinges on their ability to integrate scientific advancement with humanistic reflection. Will they remain spaces of critical inquiry, or will they become mere training grounds for technological industries? This question defines the evolving identity of the modern university in the digital age.

Introduction

The establishment of the University of Opole on March 10, 1994, marked a critical turning point in Polish higher education. As the first university founded after the collapse of communism in 1989, it was not just an academic institution but a symbol of Poland's transition from ideological control to intellectual autonomy. The creation of this university resulted from merging the Higher Pedagogical School with the Theological and Pastoral Institute, integrating secular and religious traditions in a way that mirrored broader global debates on the place of humanistic and spiritual reflection in technologically advancing societies.

The University of Opole was established as the 12th university of its kind in Poland, and significantly, it was the first new university created after the end of communist rule. The formation of this institution was made possible through the merger of the Higher Pedagogical School and the Theological and Pastoral Institute, a branch of the Catholic University of Lublin. Neither of these institutions had a long tradition in Opole. The Higher Pedagogical School was initially established in Wrocław in 1950, before being relocated to Opole in 1954 (see Grobelny, 1970; Reiner, 1977). The Theological and Pastoral Institute, on the other hand, was part of the Catholic University in Lublin, founded in 1918, immediately after Poland regained independence following over a century of partitions that had erased the nation from the map of Europe.

This combination was significant mainly because the two colleges had completely different traditions. The Higher Pedagogical School in Opole was one of the post-war universities where education and the ideological indoctrination of students were closely linked. This is exemplified by the histories of similar institutions in Katowice, Silesia, and Gdańsk. The pedagogical school in Katowice merged with the local branch of the Jagiellonian University in 1968, forming a separate academic entity. Two years later, the Higher Pedagogical School in Gdańsk was granted university status after merging with the University of Economics. By 1972, within the borders of post-war Poland, three more pedagogical schools—Opole, Kraków, and Rzeszów—were training students at the master's level.

The institutional landscape of Polish higher education continued to evolve with the implementation of the *Teacher's Charter of Rights and Responsibilities* (Pol. *Karta Praw Nauczyciela*) in 1972, which mandated that all teachers should be trained at the higher (master's) level. Consequently, between 1973 and 1974, additional pedagogical institutions were established based on existing schools (see Jarowiecki, 1983). After 1989, many of these universities were incorporated into larger institutions or became the foundations for new academic centers in Poland.

Currently, Poland has 43 public universities, 18 of which are supervised by the Minister of Higher Education. This same minister also oversees four economic universities, three pedagogical universities, five agricultural universities, and two technical universities. Additionally, two universities are classified as art colleges and fall under the jurisdiction of the Minister of Culture and National Heritage. Nine medical universities, categorized as medical colleges, are overseen by the Minister of Public Health. In addition to public institutions, Poland has two notable non-public universities: the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin and the SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Warsaw.

The University of Opole, therefore, represents both a continuation and a break from Poland's academic tradition. It was founded in response to historical and political pressures but also as a realization of long-standing aspirations for a higher education institution in the region. These aspirations date back to the 16th century when Prince Brzeski, George II the Magnificent, attempted to establish the Piast University in Brzeg. Similar efforts were made in the 17th century by Prince Bishop Charles of Habsburg, who planned for an academic institution near Opole. Another example of such aspirations was the Agricultural Academy in Pruszków (*Landwirtschaftliche Akademie Proskau*), a Prussian and later German school that operated between 1847 and 1881.

The shifting demographic landscape following World War II further shaped the academic development of Opole. Cities such as Opole, Wrocław, Brzeg, and Nysa were incorporated into Poland as part of the so-called "recovered lands" (Pol. *ziemie odzyskne*), leading to significant population displacements. Many Polish settlers, who had been expelled from territories annexed by

the Soviet Union, resettled in these areas. The migration of faculty members from the University of Lviv to Wrocław further influenced Polish academia, allowing the University of Wrocław to position itself as an intellectual successor to one of Poland's pre-war academic powerhouses.

The founding of the University of Opole was also influenced by the suppression of theological faculties by the communist regime. After 1954, theological studies were systematically removed from public universities, including the University of Wrocław. Many displaced theology professors relocated to the seminary in Nysa or the Theological and Pastoral Institute in Opole. As a result, institutions such as the Catholic University of Lublin remained some of the few centers for theological and philosophical studies under communist rule. Figures such as Karol Wojtyła—later Pope John Paul II—taught at the Catholic University of Lublin, reinforcing the importance of independent academic spaces in maintaining intellectual traditions.

With this complex historical background, the establishment of the University of Opole was not just an academic initiative but also a symbolic gesture. It reflected Poland's transition to a democratic society, free from ideological restrictions. However, the university also inherited challenges from its predecessors, particularly in navigating the ideological divisions between secular and religious academic traditions. These tensions, alongside the broader evolution of global academia, continue to shape the university's trajectory in the 21st century.

The Specificity of the Higher Pedagogical School in Opole

The Higher Pedagogical School in Opole, although one of the best in its category, had a bad reputation in the communist era as a meeting place for representatives of the communist party and the security service, or other law enforcement services, particularly involved in the policy best articulated in the slogan expression "strengthening the people's power in Poland" (Pol. *umacnianie władzy ludowej w Polsce*). In addition, within its walls, diplomas were obtained

not only by the aforementioned representatives of the security services but also by members of the communist authority who performed various functions in the state administration.

On the other hand, the Theological and Pastoral Institute, as a branch of the Catholic University in Lublin, represented the only non-public university in Poland and, therefore, remained independent, due to the fact that it was financed exclusively by the Catholic Church. As a result, it was the only fully independent and Catholic university existing in the entire Soviet bloc, where communist governments fully controlled all levels of education. Within this free university, Marxist ideas were never taught as a foundation for education, which stood in sharp contrast to other state-controlled institutions, where the Polish United Worker's Party imposed its ideological model of education.

Throughout the communist period in Poland, the Catholic University of Lublin also provided refuge for students expelled from public universities due to their political, religious, or ideological beliefs. Because of this, it became a frequent target of state repression, particularly during the 1950s and 1960s. Measures taken against the university included the banning of the Faculty of Law and Social and Pedagogical Sciences (1953–1956), economic pressures to lure professors away to state institutions, and the systematic expulsion of faculty members. Severe censorship was imposed on university publications, and books deemed anti-communist or anti-socialist were removed from library collections. Additionally, the institution was under constant surveillance by the secret services of the Security Office (see Gałaszewska-Chilczuk, 2013). Despite these efforts, the university remained open, becoming a symbol of academic freedom and resistance.

Given these starkly different institutional backgrounds, the merger of the Higher Pedagogical School and the Theological and Pastoral Institute to form the University of Opole was far from straightforward. However, political and social factors made Opole a particularly favorable site for establishing the first university in free Poland. The decision was further reinforced by Poland's full liberation from Soviet influence in 1993, when the last Russian soldier crossed the country's borders, marking the official end of the communist era.

Local aspirations also played a significant role in the university's foundation. The region had long sought to establish an academic institution, with historical

attempts dating back to the 16th century when Prince Brzeski, George II the Magnificent, attempted to establish the Piast University in Brzeg. Similar efforts were made in the 17th century by Prince Bishop Charles of Habsburg. The region also had a history of academic development with the Agricultural Academy in Pruszków (Landwirtschaftliche Akademie Proskau), a Prussian and later German school that operated near Opole from 1847 to 1881 (see Nicieja, 2005).

However, the region's demographic landscape underwent significant changes following World War II. Cities such as Opole, Wrocław, Brzeg, and Nysa were incorporated into Polish borders as part of the so-called recovered lands, resulting in mass population shifts. Polish settlers, many of whom had been displaced from territories annexed by the Soviet Union, replaced the previous German-speaking population. This migration also had a profound academic impact, as faculty from the University of Lviv relocated to Wrocław, allowing the University of Wrocław to position itself as an intellectual successor to one of Poland's pre-war academic powerhouses.

A key factor in the University of Opole's formation was the historical suppression of theological faculties by the communist regime. After 1954, theological studies were systematically removed from universities, including the University of Wrocław. Many displaced theology professors found positions at the seminary in Nysa or the Theological and Pastoral Institute in Opole. As a result, institutions such as the Catholic University of Lublin remained some of the few centers for theological and philosophical studies under communist rule. Figures such as Karol Wojtyła—later Pope John Paul II—taught at the Catholic University of Lublin, reinforcing the importance of independent academic spaces in maintaining intellectual traditions.

Due to the indigenous population living in the area of the present Opolskie Voivodeship, who was not resettled to Germany after World War II and is now partially identified as a German minority, the fact that the nationality issue played an important role in the establishment of a new university in Opole is not publicized. In this context, the actions of Alfons Nossol, bishop of the Opole diocese, established only in 1974 due to the post-war conflict over the administrative division of the Catholic Church in the territories belonging

to Germany before 1945, were significant. Alfons Nossol, who descended from a family of Silesian Germans, was at the same time a lecturer at the Catholic University of Lublin and involved all his authority in the creation of the university, persuading the Polish authorities to support this initiative (see Nowakowska, 2012). In these activities, however, he used not only his position in the church or academic hierarchy but also his close relations with Germany, and especially with the universities operating in the area. Thus, he used the argument that the law that would apply to Poland in the future, striving to tighten relations with Western Europe, would lead to granting students permission to study in the reunited Germany, or it might allow the establishment of a branch of one of the German universities. These arguments, apart from those closely related to the potential inherent in the scientific community of Opole, must have appealed to the authorities, since despite the reluctance of the academic community in Poland, fearing the creation of another university, on October 1, 1994, a new Athenaeum was launched on the map of Poland. In the foundation act, it was emphasized that the employees of the Pedagogical University and the Theological and Pastoral Institute automatically become employees of the new academic body.

The reluctance to sever ties with former regime-affiliated academics resulted in a prolonged period of institutional stagnation. Many of these individuals remained in influential positions, shaping the academic culture of the university. This situation only began to change with generational turnover and the gradual retirement of compromised figures. Nonetheless, the legacy of these early compromises continues to influence the university's governance and academic priorities today.

This evolving academic landscape has raised fundamental questions about the university's broader identity. As traditional structures fade and new academic paradigms emerge, institutions must navigate not only their historical legacy but also their role in contemporary knowledge production. One of the more intriguing dimensions of this transformation is how universities reconcile longstanding theological traditions with the rapid rise of scientific and technological advancements. Balancing these influences will be crucial in shaping the University of Opole's role in the future of higher education.

The Changing Landscape of Academia: Spirituality, Technology, and Corporate Dominance

A particularly intriguing aspect of contemporary academia is the emergence of technology-driven spirituality. The rise of neurofeedback, mindfulness applications, and other biofeedback technologies as modern substitutes for traditional spiritual experiences reflects a profound shift from classical theological reflections on human existence to a physiological understanding of spirituality, where bodily states replace metaphysical contemplation (Gruzelier, 2014; Marzbani et al., 2016). Universities today are increasingly shifting their focus from truth and virtue to well-being and cognitive optimization, raising the question: Is this an expansion of spiritual understanding or a reduction of spirituality to mere biological processes?

This technological redefinition of spirituality reflects broader societal trends that prioritize empirical validation over metaphysical speculation. Practices once considered deeply personal or religious, such as meditation or prayer, are now studied through the lens of neuroscience, with researchers mapping brain activity and correlating it with subjective experiences of transcendence. While this shift enables a deeper scientific understanding of states traditionally associated with enlightenment or inner peace, it also risks stripping spirituality of its existential and theological dimensions. When the experience of the divine or the sacred is reduced to mere neuronal patterns, the question arises: does spirituality retain its essence, or does it become another function of the human brain to be optimized and enhanced like memory or attention?

Furthermore, the commercialization of spirituality through technology--driven solutions introduces ethical concerns about accessibility, authenticity, and the commodification of inner experiences. Many of these advancements are packaged as consumer products, with mindfulness apps, biofeedback headsets, and brainwave-enhancing devices promising users a shortcut to personal enlightenment. This stands in stark contrast to the traditional notion of spiritual growth as a lifelong, deeply introspective journey. By framing well-being and cognitive enhancement as primary goals, technology-driven spirituality risks catering primarily to a privileged demographic while excluding those who lack

access to such resources. In doing so, it may reinforce a consumerist approach to self-improvement rather than fostering a genuine search for meaning.

At the same time, universities are facing growing competition from private research institutions that dominate technological advancements. Just as Polish universities once struggled under communist control, they now struggle against corporate research powerhouses with vast financial resources and cutting-edge facilities. The University of Opole's struggles in its formative years demonstrate that academic institutions are most vulnerable when they lack autonomy and a clear mission. Unless universities reclaim their role as centers of ethical, philosophical, and interdisciplinary inquiry, they risk becoming obsolete in the shadow of Silicon Valley's research dominance.

The Evolution of Academic Identity in a Digital Age

As universities navigate the growing influence of technology-driven spirituality, they simultaneously face an equally significant challenge—the rising dominance of private research institutions in shaping technological advancements. Once regarded as the primary centers for knowledge creation and dissemination, universities now find themselves competing with online learning platforms, artificial intelligence research, and corporate innovation hubs that often outpace traditional academic institutions in both funding and technological progress. This shifting landscape compels universities to rethink their role, not only as educators but also as pioneers of interdisciplinary research, ethical inquiry, and intellectual leadership in an increasingly digital world.

For the University of Opole, the legacy of its founding institutions continues to shape its academic structure. Initially, the university prioritized teacher training, reflecting the pedagogical focus of the former Higher Pedagogical School. This emphasis on didactics persisted for years, with scientific research playing a secondary role. Many of the university's early faculty members had not pursued their academic training at research universities, reinforcing a culture that valued teaching over research.

This imbalance limited the institution's ability to develop a robust research profile. For many years, academic departments were managed by the same individuals, some holding their positions for over two decades. This lack of turnover contributed to stagnation, making it difficult to establish dynamic research teams or secure external funding. In response, the university introduced a new statute in 2019, aimed at shifting the balance toward research-driven development. These reforms emphasize the importance of faculty publications in prestigious journals, participation in international academic collaborations, and the establishment of interdisciplinary research initiatives.

Despite these challenges, the University of Opole has made significant strides. The institution was among the select Polish universities to participate in the European Commission's "European Universities" initiative, a prestigious program funded by Erasmus+. This recognition underscores the university's growing research ambitions and its potential to integrate into the broader European academic landscape.

The expansion of faculties over the years also reflects the university's ongoing transformation. What began in 1994 with just five faculties has since grown to twelve, covering a broad range of disciplines, including medicine, political science, and social communication. These changes demonstrate a concerted effort to diversify the academic offerings and strengthen the university's competitiveness in Poland's higher education landscape.

However, structural challenges remain. The prioritization of didactics over research has proven difficult to overcome, particularly within faculties that retain longstanding administrative figures resistant to change. Similar issues can be observed at the Opole University of Technology, which, like the University of Opole, evolved from a former technical school and continues to grapple with resistance to reform. Collaboration between these two institutions could foster a stronger, more competitive academic environment in the region, but institutional inertia remains a significant barrier.

Ultimately, the transformation of academic structures at the University of Opole illustrates the broader tension between tradition and innovation in higher education. As universities navigate the challenges posed by technological disruption, they must also confront internal limitations that hinder their capacity

for adaptation. The University of Opole's journey—from a pedagogically focused institution to an emerging research university—highlights the complexities of academic evolution in a rapidly changing world.

A Path Forward: Balancing Innovation and Tradition

To maintain their relevance in the 21st century, universities must strike a balance between innovation and tradition. While embracing technological advancements is necessary, it must not come at the cost of erasing the humanities, ethical studies, and interdisciplinary discourse that have long defined academia.

A well-rounded academic institution must be built upon a strong moral foundation, a principle reinforced by the experiences of Central and Eastern Europe. The post-communist transformation of higher education highlights the dangers of ideological control over universities and the consequences of reducing academic institutions to politically motivated entities. One of the greatest challenges facing Polish universities today is the tendency for the humanities to become overly ideologized, focusing on artificial problems generated by economically developed societies rather than drawing on the lessons of the past to prepare students for the future.

As Pope John Paul II noted:

> Today much is said about Europe's Christian roots. If cathedrals, artwork, music, and literature are signs of them, in a certain sense they are eloquent in silence. Universities, on the other hand, can speak about them aloud. They can speak in the language of today, comprehensible to everyone. Yes, their voices might not be heard by those who are deafened by the ideology of the secularization of our Continent, but this does not dispense academics, faithful to historical truth, from the task of bearing witness through a sound examination of the secrets of knowledge and wisdom that have flourished in the fertile soil of Christianity (John Paul II, 2004).

This highlights the broader role of universities beyond mere knowledge transmission: they serve as custodians of historical truth and ethical discourse, capable of navigating the delicate balance between secular and theological perspectives. While theological faculties remain a contentious issue in certain academic environments—such as in Italy, where historical conflicts between the Church and the state led to the removal of theological departments—Poland presents a contrasting case. Here, Catholicism has been a unifying force in national identity, and its presence within academic institutions has played a role in shaping intellectual traditions.

A comparison with Germany further illustrates this contrast. In German universities, theological faculties exist without special privileges, functioning alongside other academic disciplines. In Poland, however, the elimination of theological faculties during the communist era remains a sensitive issue, as it was part of a broader effort to sever ties with Western cultural heritage. One particularly revealing example was the communist regime's attack on Latin education in Poland. Since Latin was historically tied to Western intellectual traditions, its removal from school curricula aimed to erode connections to pre-Soviet cultural and academic influences. The long-term consequences of this policy are still evident today, as the limited presence of Latin in university programs restricts access to classical literature, historical scholarship, and theological studies.

Given these historical lessons, universities must carefully navigate their role in shaping contemporary discourse. One approach is fostering stronger collaborations between technical disciplines and the humanities. Integrating ethical AI studies, philosophy of technology, and digital humanities into university curricula can help bridge the gap between technological progress and humanistic inquiry. Additionally, universities should leverage their unique position to serve as ethical watchdogs in an era dominated by corporate technological interests.

A key challenge in maintaining academic integrity is resisting ideological pressures that distort intellectual inquiry. The experiences of universities under communist rule provide a cautionary tale: when academic institutions become tools of political manipulation, their ability to seek truth and advance knowledge is compromised. Today, similar risks exist in the form of ideological agendas that

shape academic programs and research priorities. Universities must therefore reaffirm their commitment to intellectual independence by fostering open discourse and resisting the appropriation of academic spaces by ideological movements.

The transformation of universities in post-communist countries provides a unique perspective on the broader role of higher education. While Western universities often debate the balance between tradition and progress, post--communist institutions have a more immediate concern: rebuilding academic environments that were once heavily controlled by the state. This process involves not only revising curricula and research priorities but also re--establishing academic freedom as a fundamental principle.

Ultimately, breaking away from ideological constraints and reaffirming universities as spaces for critical inquiry and intellectual rigor is essential for their future. This requires an ongoing discussion about the role of academic institutions in shaping national and global discourse. The lessons learned from the past—particularly the dangers of subordinating universities to external political forces—must inform present efforts to safeguard academic freedom.

In conclusion, universities must remain committed to their foundational mission: fostering intellectual curiosity, advancing knowledge, and promoting ethical inquiry. The humanities should not be reduced to instruments of political ideology, nor should they be sidelined in favor of purely technical disciplines. Instead, a holistic academic environment—where tradition and innovation coexist—offers the best path forward. The ability of universities to navigate this balance will determine their relevance in the evolving landscape of higher education.

Conclusion

Universities were once centers of dialogue between theology, philosophy, and science—a space where questions of existence, morality, and knowledge converged. The University of Opole's complex history demonstrates both the fragility and necessity of academic institutions in times of ideological and technological upheaval.

As technology reshapes education, we must ask: Can universities reclaim their role as spaces for holistic intellectual exploration, integrating both scientific progress and humanistic reflection? Or will they become mere training grounds for corporate research, losing their capacity to question, reflect, and engage with the deeper meanings of existence? The answers to these questions will determine whether the modern university remains a beacon of knowledge and ethical inquiry—or whether it fades into irrelevance in the face of a world governed solely by technological determinism.

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Does art have to be created by humans?

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Abstract: This paper explores the question of whether art must be created by humans, examining the intersection of artificial intelligence (AI) and artistic expression from philosophical, historical, and aesthetic perspectives. Drawing on foundational texts by Walter Benjamin, Alan Turing, John Searle, and Władysław Tatarkiewicz, the discussion considers the cognitive limitations of AI, particularly

its lack of intentionality, consciousness, and emotional depth—qualities traditionally associated with human creativity. The paper analyzes notable AI--generated artworks, such as *The New Rembrandt*, *Théâtre D'opéra Spatial*, and *Edmond de Belamy*, as case studies that challenge conventional definitions of authorship and creativity. While AI can generate compelling imitations using combinatorial and exploratory creativity, it falls short of transformative artistic innovation rooted in subjective experience. The paper argues that AI should be viewed not as an autonomous artist but as a powerful creative tool. Ultimately, the capacity for emotional expression, symbolic meaning, and aesthetic intentionality remains exclusive to human creators, rendering AI-generated outputs as imitative and soulless rather than genuinely artistic.

Keywords: art, intentionality, limits of art, aesthetics, philosophy of art, epistemology, artificial intelligence

Introduction

Addressing the question posed in the title requires first clarifying and defining the core concepts, thereby avoiding the common misunderstandings, oversimplifications, and distortions that frequently accompany discussions in this age of pervasive artificial intelligence (AI). It is commonly believed that, with the 20th-century rise of machines capable of processing information analogously to human thought, fundamental questions about intelligence, creativity, consciousness, and the relationship between humanity and machines have become increasingly urgent. These questions have given rise to far-reaching skepticism. On one hand, they have fueled fears of anthropomorphizing artificial intelligence—particularly whether it might become conscious or capable of self--reflection. On the other hand, they have inspired enthusiastic declarations about the digital humanization of modern existence. Among AI's many applications, its role in the creation of art is widely debated. Questions arise regarding the role of the artist, the nature of creative subjectivity, the boundaries of creativity itself, and the emergence of new digital styles. In this context, a key question

must be asked: in the age of digital humanism, do we still need human artists, or will they be replaced by AI?

A Thinking Machine? History of Controversies

Such questions about the relationship between humans and machines preceded AI's use in art. Therefore, when analyzing the relation between art and artificial intelligence, it is worth recalling Walter Benjamin's 1935 essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. In this influential work, Benjamin examined the profound consequences of the unrestricted mass reproduction and distribution of artworks. Although his analysis focused on photography, gramophone records, and film, the insights he offered remain strikingly relevant today. He argued that mechanical reproduction erodes the aura of true art—its uniqueness and authenticity—by making it ubiquitous and disconnected from its original context. For Benjamin, mechanically reproduced art—lacking the direct involvement of the artist—marked a turning point in art history. It transformed art into something distant and impersonal, offering only an ersatz of true artistic experience. In other words, mass reproduction leads to the loss of the "soul" of art. Benjamin emphasized not only the mechanical possibilities of reproduction but also the mechanical origin of such art, drawing a sharp distinction between authentic, original creation and its mechanical counterpart. This distinction between real and mechanical art—between the intimate and the mass-produced— still resonates today, particularly in the context of AI-generated works. In many ways, Benjamin's essay proves prophetic, anticipating the philosophical questions we now face about authorship, originality, and the role of the creator in an age of algorithmic generation (Benjamin, 1935).

The philosophical inquiry into the cognitive capacities of machines was continued by Alan Turing. In his 1950 paper *Computing Machinery and Intelligence*, Turing asked whether machines could think—a question that laid the foundation for modern AI debates. Although the answers to this question are somewhat archaic today, Turing was one of the first to analyze the ability to process natural language, thus opening the debate on whether computers can be

considered thinking machines or whether they will remain mere combinatorial generators of previously uploaded data. It is worth noting that the debate initiated by Turing was not limited to the IT community, but also involved cyberneticists, neuroscientists, and philosophers (Turning, 1950).

These debates soon extended beyond computer science and sparked a rather critical philosophical stance. In 1965, Hubert L. Dreyfus compared the pursuit of equating artificial intelligence with human thought to the efforts of alchemists attempting to turn metal into gold or discover a *panacea* for immortality. According to Dreyfus, the main argument for the non-translatability of human thinking into binary code lies in the categories of common sense and intuition—qualities that people use when making decisions. These elements, deeply embedded in embodied human experience, will never be available to any machine, regardless of its sophistication (Dreyfus, 1965).

Among the philosophers who questioned the cognitive ability of machines at the human level was the American philosopher John Rogers Searle. In his research on the mind, he drew attention to the concept of intentionality—the capacity to have mental states directed at or about something—which he considered the exclusive domain of the human mind. His famous Chinese Room thought experiment is particularly noteworthy. In this scenario, Searle describes an isolated room where a person who does not know Chinese receives questions in Chinese and uses a rulebook to produce appropriate responses, all without understanding the language. To external observers, it appears as though the person understands Chinese, but in reality, they are merely following syntactic rules without semantic comprehension. Searle argued that this situation mirrors what computers do: manipulating symbols based on programming without genuine understanding (Searle, 1980).

According to Searle, while advanced programs may allow computers to simulate correct answers, they do so without awareness or comprehension, which disqualifies them from achieving human-like consciousness or intentionality. Extending this analogy, he claimed that even the most advanced AI algorithms, capable of analyzing the literary patterns of Anton Chekhov, the painting style of Piet Mondrian, or the musical forms of Gustav Mahler,

remain confined to the realm of stylistic imitation. They lack the capacity for emotional or aesthetic understanding, as true creativity is grounded in internal experience—a quality machines inherently lack. For Searle, the mere processing, shuffling, and recombination of algorithmic data is neither creative nor comparable to genuine understanding. Artistic meaning, he argues, is rooted in the internal experiences of both the artist and the recipient—something machines inherently lack. As a result, AI-generated outputs remain hybrids at best, capable of imitation but devoid of true insight. Most importantly, Searle underscores that artificial intelligence lacks intentionality in the human sense—it has no rational or conscious reference to reality (Searle, 1980).

Hilary Putnam and Jerry Fodor echoed this view, emphasizing that intentionality is a necessary condition for intelligence. Fodor, in particular, explored the deep relationship between thought, meaning, and mental representation (Putnam, 1975; Fodor, 1994).

Although there is no consensus on whether AI can actually have *true* intentionality or consciousness, some philosophers allow for this possibility or believe that it can be attributed in a specific and narrow sense (see: Dennett, 1971; Minsky, 1986; Chalmers, 1996; Clark, 2008).

Creativity—long considered a hallmark of human cognition—is, in this view, intrinsically human. It is not merely the rearrangement of existing elements but an expression of internal experiences shaped by culture, emotion, and memory. For this reason, doubts about machine creativity are not simply technical—they arise from deeper philosophical concerns. At the heart of the debate lies the question of whether machines can truly be creative—a quality that, despite its complexity and rich philosophical lineage, has historically been attributed solely to human thought. Creativity has served as one of the defining traits of *Homo sapiens*, the only species capable of generating a cumulative culture imbued with values, symbols, and traditions. Philosophers of mind such as Searle, Putnam, and Fodor argue that even the most advanced machines—those employing neural networks or analogous analytical methods—lack intention, emotional control, and therefore consciousness in the full human sense (Putnam, 1975; Fodor, 1994).

The Humanization of Digital Aesthetics

Both the aforementioned critical voices—denying artificial intelligence's capacity for creativity at the level of human consciousness—and the enthusiastic declarations of supporters who advocate for the anthropomorphization of digital machines resurface during various high-profile events that test the boundaries of artistic authorship and authenticity. In 2022, such a moment occurred at the Colorado State Fair, reigniting debates around the role of AI in art. Jason M. Allen submitted a painting titled *Théâtre D'opéra Spatial* and won first prize in the digital art category. The work had been generated using the AI tool Midjourney, which creates images from text prompts. Crucially, the jury—composed of art theorists, curators, and practicing artists—was unaware of the painting's AI origins. Once revealed, the decision sparked controversy. Critics questioned whether the aesthetic value of the piece, a depiction of a mythical landscape, was compromised by its algorithmic genesis. The incident raised fundamental concerns about authorship, originality, and deception in an age where AI-generated work can be indistinguishable from human-made art.

A similar discussion was triggered by the 2016 project *The New Rembrandt*, a collaboration between Delft University of Technology, Microsoft, ING Bank, and several Dutch museums. In this case, data from 346 Rembrandt paintings were analyzed in meticulous detail—tracking brushstroke patterns, chromatic composition, clothing styles, facial features, and lighting effects. The AI system then synthesized this information to create an entirely new portrait in the style of Rembrandt, printed in three dimensions using layered paint and glaze. The final result: a 148 × 129 cm portrait of a fictional man dressed in black with a white collar, evoked the painter's signature use of chiaroscuro and compositional balance. The project received widespread acclaim, with many celebrating the possibility of "a new painting by the master" centuries after his death. Yet critics were quick to respond: while the algorithm could convincingly replicate Rembrandt's style, it merely recombined existing data—akin to a forger "capturing the spirit" of an artist's work without contributing genuine innovation or intent. In this view, the programmer feeding data into the system, no matter how sophisticated the algorithm, is not an artist in the traditional sense.

Definitional Difficulties

The question posed in the title of the article—whether art must be created by humans—ultimately boils down to two philosophical issues: the definition of art and creativity and the relationship between humans and machines. In essence, it hinges on two fundamental concerns: how we define creativity and how we define art itself.

When defining creativity in aesthetic terms, it is worth turning to Władysław Tatarkiewicz (1982), who, in *Dzieje sześciu pojęć* (Eng. *The History of Six Concepts*), offers a precise account of the historical evolution of the notions of reproduction and creativity—effectively tracing the conceptual history of creativity itself. According to Tatarkiewicz (1982), artistic creativity is characterized by innovation, originality, inventiveness, and the capacity to break new ground, while reproduction is aligned with imitation. Contemporary understandings of creativity, however, tend to be more nuanced and scalar, encompassing several dimensions: combinatorial creativity, which involves synthesizing existing elements in novel ways; exploratory creativity, which operates within established systems and patterns; and transformational creativity, which breaks with convention to produce genuinely original work, often tied to emotional expression and individual experience. When we examine these categories more closely, it becomes apparent that artificial intelligence currently meets only the first two: combinatorial and exploratory creativity.

If we wish to ask whether art must be created by a human, we must first confront a more fundamental question: what is art? Without at least a working definition, any further discussion risks descending into vagueness, imprecision, or overgeneralization. Yet it is important to acknowledge that, since the 20th century, efforts to define art have been met with increasing skepticism. Rather than being merely difficult, many philosophers argue that defining art is, in fact, impossible. Ludwig Wittgenstein (1966), in his reflections on language and language games, observed that certain concepts—art among them—lack a set of common, defining features. As such, they remain open-ended and resistant to rigid categorization. Morris Weitz (1956), echoed this view, asserting that the philosophical challenge lies not in the difficulty of defining art, but

in the futility of attempting to do so. Similarly, William Elmer Kennick (1958), argued that the central error of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline is its relentless pursuit of a fixed definition for a subject that may, by nature, defy one.

Authors who embraced this skepticism toward definitions often argued that one of the fundamental pillars of artistic practice is freedom of expression—something that cannot be confined within rigid conceptual frameworks. Such frameworks, they contended, risk limiting artists to pre-established boundaries, stifling innovation and experimentation. From this perspective, artists are not only free to create works that fall outside existing definitions, but also to explore novel materials, previously nonexistent media, and the possibilities opened up by emerging technologies. While some sought to temper this view by asserting that meaningful discourse about art remains possible even in the absence of a strict definition, time has revealed the limitations of this approach. Analyses grounded in vague or overly fluid criteria often reduce philosophical and scholarly discussions to the level of everyday conversation—a tendency especially apparent in current debates surrounding the intersection of artificial intelligence and art.

Among the many philosophical efforts to define art with precision, Władysław Tatarkiewicz's (1982) proposal stands out as particularly noteworthy. His carefully balanced analyses are marked by objectivity and a resistance to bias. In his dialogues with Anglo-Saxon philosophers, Tatarkiewicz considered both the material dimensions of art history and artistic practice, as well as the theoretical challenges posed by the avant-garde movements of the early 20th century. This measured and cautious approach, avoiding extreme claims, lends significant weight to his contribution to the definitional debate. Tatarkiewicz's philosophical stance is distinguished by an earnest search for a common denominator—a thread of typicality within the vast diversity of artistic expression. His aim was to identify a unifying feature that could encompass all works of art. Defying the prevailing skepticism of his time, Tatarkiewicz put forth his own definition: "Art is the recreation of things, the construction of forms, or the expression of experiences—if the product of this recreation, construction, or expression is capable of delighting, moving, or shocking" (Tatarkiewicz, 1982, p. 248).

Although broad in scope, this definition manages to distinguish a category of objects regarded as art from ordinary reality, while also capturing certain intuitive responses we experience when engaging with artworks. If we provisionally accept Władysław Tatarkiewicz's definition, then addressing the question posed in the article's title—"Does art have to be created by humans?"—requires us first to clarify what we mean by artificial intelligence, a term that has grown increasingly ambiguous in recent years.

For the purposes of this article, we can adopt a working definition of artificial intelligence as the capacity of digital machines to process data in a way that mirrors human cognition. In other words, a sufficiently programmed computer can gather and interpret information using algorithms that emulate the human mind. Accordingly, art generated by artificial intelligence refers to any form of artistic creation that relies on programming and cannot be produced without it.

It is essential to recognize that artificial intelligence is not a monolithic entity, but rather a convergence of diverse, specialized technologies, each designed for particular functions. Depending on its programming, AI can gather and interpret visual, auditory, numerical, or linguistic data to perform its designated tasks. Consequently, if we adopt Władysław Tatarkiewicz's (1982) definition of art, then AI-generated art may satisfy the criterion of recreating objects or constructing forms. However, it falls short of fulfilling the dimension of expressing lived experience.

Concluding remarks

In examining the relationship between art and artificial intelligence, several key points merit emphasis.

First, the advanced algorithms used to generate images—such as Google's *Deep Dream* (2015), which employs neural networks to recognize and produce images, or text-to-image models like *Midjourney* and *Stable Diffusion*—as well as those used for music composition (e.g., *AIVA*, the Artificial Intelligence Virtual Artist, which analyzes harmonic structures to create new musical arrangements), and literary creation (e.g., *LaMDA*, Language Model for Dialogue

Applications, *AI Dungeon*, or *Jasper AI*, which synthesize massive datasets of literary texts, online content, and dialogues to generate narratives complete with plot, character development, and dialogue) all belong to a category known as generative algorithms. These systems operate by recombining material that has already been encoded into their memory.

Even if we entertain the possibility that artificial intelligence can generate content autonomously in response to user interaction, it is crucial to remember that such algorithms—despite mimicking neural networks—remain confined to the boundaries of their programming. In essence, an AI application that "creates" art is merely executing tasks within a predefined set of rules. It does not create in the human sense but rather simulates creativity through the emulation of programmed instructions.

Secondly, even when using programs that employ technologies capable of "learning from aesthetics"—by analyzing vast collections of images, music, or literature—we remain confined to a repository of what already exists. In contrast, nearly every act of artistic creation—whether in music, literature, or the visual arts—is inherently subject to revision, reinterpretation, and transformation, shaped by the artist's evolving experience and external influences. Consider Pablo Picasso's iconic *Guernica*. Originally conceived in 1937 as a purely abstract mural for the Paris World Exhibition, the work was not intended to carry any specific political or representational message. However, following the bombing of the Basque town of Guernica by the German Condor Legion on April 26 of that year, Picasso radically altered his vision. The abstract concept gave way to a stark, figurative composition that powerfully conveys the horrors of war. Throughout the painting process, Picasso continually modified the arrangement of figures, adding and removing elements as the emotional and political weight of the subject deepened. This fluid, responsive process—shaped by changing contexts, emotional resonance, and artistic intuition—is emblematic of the kind of intentional creativity that artificial intelligence fundamentally lacks.

It is true that some artificial intelligence programs exhibit a level of generativity that can seem unpredictable. However, this apparent unpredictability—often mistaken for creativity—stems from the processing of vast datasets far beyond human reach, both in terms of scale and speed. It is crucial to remember that such

systems function solely within the bounds of pre-existing data stored on disk. In the realm of art, for example, these models generate output based on previously ingested images, texts, or music. In essence, artificial intelligence simply "feeds us" a recombination of what it has already been fed.

If we accept artistic freedom as a defining criterion for the creation of art, then by that standard, art generated by artificial intelligence must be excluded. AI, after all, lacks the capacity for freedom—computational power and data processing alone do not constitute autonomy—nor can it intentionally express emotion. Rather than viewing AI as an autonomous creator, we should consider it a tool for artistic expression, another medium in the artist's toolkit. Framing AI in this way may simplify the debate to some extent, positioning it alongside instruments like the musical keyboard, the paintbrush, or the camera—tools that extend the artist's vision but do not replace it.

Finally, it is worth addressing a frequently overlooked aspect of discussions surrounding AI and art. If we embrace the post-avant-garde definition of art—which allows anyone, regardless of technical skill or imaginative capacity, to be considered an artist—and combine it with the postmodern notion of cultural exhaustion, where art is reduced to a patchwork of mixed styles, pastiche, and self-referentiality, then within such an expansive framework, artificial intelligence can indeed be regarded as an artist, and computational algorithms as autonomous instruments of artistic creation. A striking example of this perspective is the French art collective Obvious, composed of Hugo Caselles-Dupré, Pierre Fautrel, and Gauthier Vernier. In 2018, the group gained international attention when their AI-generated portrait *Edmond de Belamy* was auctioned at Christie's in New York, fetching an astonishing $432,500. The portrait depicts a male figure in a dark coat and white collar, his face slightly blurred, giving the image an unfinished, ghostly quality. As noted in the auction catalog, the artwork was created using an algorithm defined by an algebraic formula developed by the collective. The process behind the portrait's creation involved feeding over 15,000 historical portraits—from the 14th to the 20th century—into a neural network. A specially trained generator then attempted to produce a new image by distinguishing between human-made portraits and those synthesized by the machine, ultimately crafting an output that could convincingly mimic the former. The goal was to create an illusion: a portrait

that *feels* human-made. Despite the conceptual ambition behind the project, it is difficult to fully accept the claim that these algorithms demonstrate genuine creativity rather than mere generativity. Even the members of Obvious express caution when it comes to assigning authorship to AI. As Caselles-Dupré aptly puts it: "If the artist is the one who creates the image, then that would be the machine. If the artist is the one who holds the vision and wants to share the message, then that would be us" (Caselles-Dupré, 2018).

It is important to note that most of these types of "works" fall within the realm of abstract art. This is largely because the algorithm responsible for generating new forms follows a model that mirrors the historical progression of art—from figuration to abstraction. In this light, the conversation evokes parallels with the long-standing debate over whether animals are capable of creating art.

Some theorists, such as Desmond Morris (2013), Karl von Frisch (1974), Irene Pepperberg (2008) argue that certain animals do exhibit creativity. They may even demonstrate a preference for individual style and engage in artistic behavior purely for pleasure, occasionally producing results that are aesthetically pleasing to human observers. However, such interpretations tend to overlook a crucial distinction: animals lack symbolic consciousness. Their creations—no matter how visually appealing—are not the product of deliberate reflection or the result of rigorous training in technique. What is most often ignored in these discussions is that such examples, whether generated by animals or algorithms, typically operate within the framework of so-called non-figurative art.

When considering whether artificial intelligence can fully meet human aesthetic needs, two perspectives emerge: affirmative and negative. The affirmative view applies primarily to superficial or passive engagement with art—comparable to ambient music, which often lacks a distinct melodic line and departs from traditional song structures. In such cases, the aesthetic experience is fulfilled by the creation of an atmospheric soundscape, offering a pleasing background rather than a focal point of artistic contemplation. Conversely, the negative perspective resonates with those who seek depth, originality, and a sense of artistic presence. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's (1935) concept of the *aura*, this view holds that true aesthetic satisfaction arises from a unique, transcendent connection to the artwork—something that current AI, despite its capabilities, may not yet be able to replicate.

In summarizing and synthesizing critical perspectives, Vladen Joler's (2022) work *New Extractivism* stands out, particularly for its striking metaphor: a modern individual utilizing artificial intelligence is likened to a prisoner in Plato's cave. Shackled by digital technologies, this prisoner's perception is shaped by AI-generated simulations—synthetic images mistaken for reality. The neural networks that structure discourse become impenetrable walls, preventing any awareness of the broader truth. According to Joler, escape is possible only through what he terms "pulling the plug".

While acknowledging the metaphysical nature of this conclusion and its reliance on metaphorical representations of the immeasurable, one may still argue that artificial intelligence, by its very nature, can produce only soulless art.

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Natural or Supernatural? Two Perspectives on Acquiring Christian Faith

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Abstract: This paper explores a conflict between two accounts of the origins of Christian faith and outlines a solution to this conflict. The first account, rooted in Christian theological tradition, sees faith as a supernatural gift

from God. The second, based on the Cognitive Science of Religion, explains how people acquire religious beliefs through purely natural processes. After sketching both accounts, I identify the key area in which they conflict: accepting that faith is supernatural seems to preclude a fully naturalistic explanation of the origins of faith, seemingly forcing one to choose between the theological and the scientific account. To resolve this conflict, I draw on an Augustine--inspired conception of miracles and Denis Edwards' theology of divine action.

Keywords: grace, nature, faith, Cognitive Science of Religion, naturalism

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to outline a conflict between two accounts of the aetiology of Christian faith and to offer a possible solution to this conflict[1]. The first account is rooted in the way Christians have traditionally understood their own faith: as a supernatural gift from God. According to this account, to acquire beliefs that form the cognitive core of Christian faith, such as the belief that Jesus is divine or that God is triune, one needs special supernatural help from God (grace)[2]. The second account draws on naturalistic theories of religion developed in the burgeoning field of the Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR). According to this account, the formation of the beliefs that form the core of Christian faith can be explained in terms of naturally evolved cognitive mechanisms, without any recourse to special divine activity.

In what follows, I will sketch the contours of these two accounts of the origins of Christian faith. This will then allow me to identify a precise area where they come into conflict. It seems that once we accept the supernatural character

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[1]   For a more detailed treatment of the subject, see my papers: Ruczaj, 2022; 2024.

[2]   My focus in this paper will be on the cognitive aspect of Christian faith, that is, Christian religious beliefs. I am well aware that there is more to faith than its cognitive aspect. However, as Alvin Plantinga (2000, p. 247) has aptly pointed out, "even if faith is more than cognitive, it is also and at least a cognitive activity. It is a matter of believing ("knowledge", Calvin says) something or other".

of Christian faith, we must reject the possibility that there will ever be a fully naturalistic explanation of how people come to believe; this implies that one has to choose between the theological and the scientific accounts. My solution to this conflict, which I will formulate in the final part of the paper, exemplifies an increasingly common theological trend in thinking about the relationship between science and religion, which presents God's action in the world as perfectly compatible with the operation of natural mechanisms described by the sciences (see Ritchie, 2019 for an overview). It draws on an Augustinian--inspired conception of miracles and Denis Edwards' theology of divine action in the created world.

The Supernaturality of Christian Faith

The notion that Christian faith is a gift of God has been prominent in Christian theological thought since the letters of Paul. Given the close connection between faith and salvation, the fact that faith is a divine gift means that salvation is also gratuitous (Eph 2:8-9); human beings cannot save themselves, so to speak, out of their own capacities. Accordingly, many theologians have ascribed to faith the property of *supernaturality*. In the words of the Roman Catholic theologian Avery Dulles,

> In calling faith supernatural they [Christians] do not mean simply that the revelation to which it responds discloses things that lie beyond the investigative powers of human reason. The virtue of faith is supernatural, more proximately, because the response itself is a gift from God. The act of faith is impossible unless the mind and heart of the believer are interiorly moved by divine grace (Dulles, 1994, p. 224).

The point, then, is not just that the core claims of the Christian faith, such as the divinity of Jesus or the Trinity, cannot be verified by human reason. The point is that the very acceptance of these claims as true ("the act of faith") requires special divine assistance in the form of grace. To better understand this latter

idea, consider a well-known passage from *Summa theologiae* in which Aquinas discusses the causes of faith.

> As regards … a man's assent to what belongs to the Faith, two causes can be considered: One is a cause that induces exteriorly, e.g., a miracle that is seen, or persuasion by a man (persuasio hominis) who is inducing one toward faith. Neither of these is a sufficient cause. For among those who see one and the same miracle or hear the same preaching, some believe and some do not believe. And so one must posit another, interior, cause that moves a man interiorly to assent to what belongs to the Faith (*S. T.*, 2-2.6.1).

On this account, what is required for someone to accept the core claims of the Christian doctrine as true is—firstly—some sort of external trigger that draws one's attention to these claims. This may be a conversation with a Christian friend in which they offer arguments for the truth of Christianity, or the witnessing of an extraordinary event that could be interpreted as a miracle. But such external stimuli alone are not enough. After all, Christianity is beyond the reach of human reason, which means that its truth cannot be proved by historical or philosophical arguments; no matter how convincing your Christian friend might be, his arguments would never be sufficient to make you believe. And one may respond to a most extraordinary event simply by shrugging one's shoulders. This is where grace comes in. Its role is to prompt one to accept as true the core claims of Christianity, which have already been brought to one's attention by an external trigger. According to Aquinas, grace accomplishes this by causing the individual to love what Christianity proclaims. It is love that leads them to recognise that Christianity is true. As the eminent commentator on Thomas's thought, Brian Davies, observes:

> Christians are what they are because they love God and he loves them. He [Aquinas] thinks that those with faith are attracted to God as Christian preaching proclaims him to be. And he thinks that they are attracted in this way because God makes them so (Davies, 1993, p. 280).

Importantly, for Aquinas, the way in which grace works in bringing a person to faith is by raising or perfecting the nature of the individual (in Aquinas's words, "in assenting to what belongs to the Faith, a man is elevated above his nature"—*S. T.*, II-II.6.1) so that they can accept as true something that they would otherwise be unable to accept. Indeed, on this view, faith is something miraculous in the sense in which miracles "exceed the productive power of nature" (McGrew, 2019, §1.1). In miracles, God's creative activity produces effects either by bypassing the created order or by transforming it so that creatures can transcend their natural capacities. What is crucial for my present purposes is that a miracle in this sense does not succumb to scientific explanation in terms of natural causes, not only *de facto* (as in: given our present state of knowledge, we don't know how to explain scientifically how this event occurred), but also *de iure* (as in: we would never be able to offer a scientific explanation for this event). By definition, natural causes are not sufficient to explain why a miraculous event has occurred. This has a direct bearing on how one should view the aetiology of faith, insofar as one accepts its supernaturality. For if faith is a miracle in the above sense, then it has no natural explanation, and cannot have one[3]. Any account of a person's coming to faith that does not invoke supernatural divine activity must be incomplete.

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[3]   One important Christian author who directly emphasised the miraculous nature of faith was Søren Kierkegaard. In *Philosophical Crumbs* (2009, p. 134) he calls coming to faith in the divinity of Jesus "a wonder"—a word he uses interchangeably with "miracle" (Piety, 2007). Faith arises neither because human beings simply *want* to believe in Christ ("faith is not an act of will" [Kierkegaard 2009, p. 132]), nor because it is entailed by some persuasive philosophical or historical reasoning ("belief is not a kind of knowledge" [p. 131]); it is unexplainable save as the result of the action of God, who transforms the individual by giving him "the Condition", that is, the transformative gift of grace (Wisdo, 1987, p. 109). As prominent Kierkegaardian scholar M. Westphal has explained, for Kierkegaard faith is not "a natural human capacity … the very faith by which this gift [salvation] is received is itself a gift, something we could not produce out of our own resources" (Westphal, 2014, p. 37).
    In citing such diverse thinkers as Aquinas and Kierkegaard as advocates of the supernaturality of faith, one should bear in mind some important aspects that distinguish Roman Catholic and Protestant thinking about grace and nature—see, for example, Dulles, 1994, p. 225 and Horton, 2018, p. 218).

Thus, according to the doctrine of the supernaturality of Christian faith, there is indeed something unique about the way in which Christian faith comes about—something that distinguishes it from beliefs about other, more mundane aspects of reality. Human beings cannot accept the claims of Christianity by their own powers, but must receive a transforming gift of grace that makes coming to faith something akin to a miracle. Another way of expressing this supernatural quality of faith would be to invoke the category of special divine action, which is prominent in contemporary science and religion debates (De Cruz, 2022, §3.1). According to Nicholas Saunders (2002, p. 21), special divine action refers to "[t]hose actions of God that pertain to a particular time and place in creation as distinct from another". Examples include God performing miracles or answering prayers. It also includes the operation of God's grace. This kind of divine action is to be distinguished from general divine action, which is pertains "to the whole of creation universally and simultaneously". Examples of general divine action include God creating the universe and sustaining it in being. To say that faith is supernatural in the sense outlined above is to say, in other words, that it was caused by special divine action that goes beyond God's creative and sustaining activity in the universe. Special divine action in the form of grace explains why, to return to Aquinas, "among those who see one and the same miracle or hear the same preaching, some believe and some do not believe".

Let me take stock. According to some Christian theologians, faith is supernatural; it can only be explained by recourse to a special divine activity that transforms human nature and enables a would-be believer to accept the Christian message. This makes conversion to Christianity a miraculous event. In the next section I will sketch a competing, naturalistic account of coming to faith that does not invoke any kind of divine activity. I will then argue that there is a tension between the two accounts.

Religion as a Natural Phenomenon

In *The Natural History of Religion*, David Hume famously distinguished two questions about religion: "its foundation in reason" (i.e., whether religion is

rational) and "its origin in human nature" (i.e., whether religion is natural to human beings) (2007, p. 124). The Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR) can be interpreted as an attempt to answer the latter question. It aims to explain the cross-cultural "presence, prevalence and persistence of religion" (White, 2018, p. 40) by incorporating insights from cognitive and developmental psychology and evolutionary anthropology. CSR scholars tend to see various religious phenomena as natural. In Justin Barrett's words,

> CSR has converged on the claim that religion is so common within and across cultures because of its "cognitive naturalness", its relative ease, and automaticity owing to strong undergirding in normally developing cognitive systems … Normal human cognitive systems operating in normal human environments generate converging intuitions that find satisfaction in some core religious ideas (and subsequent practices). From early childhood people easily acquire ideas about gods, a non-physical aspect of humans, and some kind of afterlife (Barrett, 2012, p. 321).

Barrett goes on to list several religious ideas to which our minds are predisposed and which make up what he calls "Natural Religion" (2012, p. 322). These include the belief in mind-endowed invisible agents interacting with the physical world, the belief that some powerful being(s) have intentionally and purposefully designed elements of the natural world, the dualism of body and soul and the belief in an afterlife, or the belief that God(s) have superpowers such as super-knowledge or super-perception. To this list one could add the tendency to read significant life events as messages from a higher power (Bering, 2002), and the tendency to see God as the "ultimate moral agent": the entity responsible for anomalous harm and help (Gray & Wegner, 2010).

CSR scholars also emphasise the role of the cultural environment in shaping specific religious beliefs (as White [2021, p. 28] puts it, "CSR scholars accept that religion is a product of the mind situated in its cultural environment"). For example, the cultural context is needed to explain why a given individual acquires the particular religious beliefs that they do, for example, why they become a Christian rather than a follower of Zeus (Gervais & Henrich, 2010).

Studies have shown that people are more likely to adopt beliefs that are endorsed by the majority (conformist learning bias) or by prestigious figures (prestige bias) (Gervais et al., 2011). The concept of Credibility Enhancing Displays (CREDs) highlights the role of religious behaviours—such as prayer, ritual participation, adherence to religious norms, and emotional expression in religious contexts—in reinforcing belief. Research indicates that individuals who are exposed to CREDs in childhood are more likely to develop strong religious beliefs later in life (Lanman & Buhrmester, 2017). In particular, rituals help to internalise especially complex or counterintuitive doctrines, such as the Christian notion of the Trinity (De Cruz, 2014, p. 491).

There is no need for a detailed account of the various theories proposed by CSR scholars to explain religion (for such an account, see, e.g., Tremlin, 2006; White, 2021; Barrett, 2004). Crucial to the issue discussed in this paper is that CSR scholars espouse methodological naturalism—a commitment to explaining religious phenomena without recourse to any supernatural being (Leech & Visala, 2011, p. 553). From the CSR perspective, that people acquire religious beliefs—including the core beliefs of the Christian faith—is explained by the interaction between their cognitive predispositions and specific cultural influences. This, of course, raises the spectre of a wholly naturalistic account of Christian faith that could undermine its supernatural character. In the next section, I will attempt to show how the naturalistic approach to religion represented by CSR conflicts with the theological account that emphasises the supernaturality of Christian faith.

Where the Conflict Really Lies

Lari Launonen (2021) has helpfully identified three general areas in which CSR may be relevant to philosophy of religion and theology. First, some scholars have argued that CSR theories of how religious beliefs arise have implications for how we should view the rationality of those beliefs. Another area is the compatibility of CSR theories with certain tenets of theism or Christianity, such as the existence of sensus divinitatis (sense of divinity) or the traditional Augustinian notion of

original sin. Third, CSR can potentially offer new empirically grounded insights into theological and philosophical debates, such as the debate about the natural knowledge of God or the debate about the divine hiddenness. The problem I want to address in this section falls into the second of these general areas: it concerns the compatibility of the doctrine of the supernaturality of faith with the CSR explanation of how Christian faith arises.

In a nutshell, the problem is this: drawing on CSR, one could argue that a satisfactory naturalistic account of how religious beliefs arise can be offered—an account that includes Christian religious beliefs, which constitute the cognitive aspect of Christian faith. Elsewhere, I have suggested in greater detail what such an account might look like (see: Ruczaj, 2022; 2024). Its most important aspect for the present discussion is that it explains the phenomenon of Christian religious beliefs without recourse to any special divine activity—or, to use Robert Nola's phrase (2018), that it 'demystifies' the origins of Christian belief by revealing its purely natural origins. Gijsbert van den Brink has recently addressed the strategy of some theists who have responded to the charge that CSR, by explaining religion in terms of natural factors, leaves no room for divine activity. These authors have argued that even if natural factors are involved in the production of religion, this does not imply that God cannot be involved in this process. Van den Brink, however, finds this strategy seriously lacking:

> … But what explanatory work is left to do for such factors? Why should we appeal to them if there is no need to do so from an empirical point of view, since natural factors suffice to explain the phenomenon? Presumably, this is the reason why we no longer attribute mental diseases to demonic possession next to invoking natural (including social) factors, or attribute thunder to Zeus or Thor next to electrostatic discharge. In other words: aren't explanations that appeal to divine agency—or let us say, for short, theological explanations—entirely superfluous? (Van den Brink, 2023, p. 219)

Occam's razor, in both its ontological and syntactic formulations, seems to obviate the need to postulate divine activity as an explanans for phenomena once we arrive at a satisfactory naturalistic account of those phenomena (pp. 219–220).

While Van den Brink ultimately does not agree that theistic concepts are superfluous or explanatorily idle (pp. 224–228), I want to emphasise here that the argument he presents above also works when applied to the question of how Christian faith arises. If we agree that the natural factors identified by CSR are sufficient to explain how people become Christian believers, then there is no longer any reason to regard this process as miraculous. In other words, once a satisfactory scientific account of the phenomenon of coming to faith has been offered, there is no need to regard God's involvement in the production of Christian faith as special in any way—that is, as different from His general activity as the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. That people accept the core claims of the Christian gospel can be explained by their natural inclination toward religiosity functioning within a particular cultural context; postulating that God transforms their human nature by grace is unnecessary. If this is the case, then there seems to be a clear conflict between the two accounts of coming to faith discussed above. On the one hand, we have great Christian thinkers such as Aquinas and Kierkegaard arguing for the miraculous nature of the process of conversion; on the other, we have a naturalistic CSR account that effectively removes the basis for seeing this process as in any way miraculous or extraordinary.

Before presenting my solution to this conflict between theological and CSR accounts of the emergence of Christian faith, I would like to consider a potential objection. Some authors argue that the cognitive mechanisms studied by CSR produce beliefs in anthropomorphic, human-like deities that bear little resemblance to the God of the Abrahamic faiths or, in philosophical terms, the God of classical theism. As Jong, Kavanagh and Visala point out, "the cognitive science of religion could equally be dubbed the cognitive science of idolatry" (2015, p. 246). Drawing on their work, Neil Messer argues that the relevance of CSR for Christian theology is only indirect: it helps to understand our tendency to create distorted, theologically incorrect representations of God (2023, p. 513). He links this tendency to what Karl Barth called "religion", that is, man's attempt to know God and to justify himself before Him (2023, p. 511). The implication for the present discussion is that if CSR explains religious belief, then it is not belief in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But this means that the whole

CSR account seems irrelevant to our discussion, since it is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that Christians believe in.

Two points should be made in response to this criticism. Firstly, it is unclear whether the concept of God which CSR regards as cognitively natural differs significantly from the God of the Abrahamic religions. Barrett (2012, p. 322) points out that "many components of Christianity consist of only small elaborations on Natural Religion". As Braddock (2022, p. 167) puts it, according to CSR, humans are predisposed to believe in supernatural agents that possess a set of attributes that make them "theistic-like". Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, even if this criticism were correct, it would only mean that—for the time being—the particular CSR-based naturalistic account of the emergence of Christian religious beliefs is insufficient. What it would not mean, however, is that such a naturalistic account is impossible, and it is this latter, stronger claim that the doctrine of the supernaturality of faith implies. Consider this: if one believes that faith arises from a special divine action that transforms human nature, that it is a miracle—then not only does faith not have a satisfactory naturalistic explanation, it cannot have one. To accept this view, however, would leave a Christian in the unenviable position of hoping that no satisfactory account of their faith will ever be proposed, something which may very well be disproved by the progress of science. Immanuel Kant is a case in point. Writing only a several decades before Darwin's theory, Kant maintained that "it is quite certain that we can never adequately come to know the organized beings and their internal possibility in accordance with merely mechanical principles of nature, let alone explain them" (Kant, 2002, pp. 270–271). And who is to say that such an explanation would not be offered for Christian religious beliefs? It seems to me, then, that Christian believers would be wise to prepare for such a scenario in advance, and to try to find ways of squaring their theology with whatever naturalistic explanation of faith that would stand the test of time.

Faith as an Augustinian Miracle

My proposal for resolving the conflict outlined above is to reject the supernaturality of faith. In this way, a Christian would not be forced to reject the possibility of

a naturalistic explanation of the aetiology of Christian faith. Importantly, this would not amount to denying that God is active in producing one's faith. One could adopt a view of divine action in the created world in which God always acts through created beings, never bypassing or modifying their natures. Such a perspective could be further developed with reference to the work of Denis Edwards, a Roman Catholic theologian who presented his views on divine action in the 2010 monograph *How God Acts: Creation, Redemption and Special Divine Action*. In it, Edwards upholds the traditional Thomistic belief in double agency— the doctrine that every effect produced by created beings (secondary causes) is also wholly produced by God (the first cause). In this view, the causal efficacy of creatures "relies on God's working in and through them" (Kittle, 2022, p. 249). However, Edwards' reflections on the nature of divine creative love led him to depart from Aquinas in denying that God ever acts without the mediation of secondary causes, and in maintaining that God always acts in a way that respects the natural limitations of His creatures. The act of divine creation, Edwards argues, is "an act of love, of risk-taking love, that enables the universe to run itself by its own laws, with its own integrity, so things behave in accordance with their own natures" (Edwards, 2010, p. 49). This has a direct bearing on how Edwards views grace and miracles:

> The natural world with its laws is the means of God's self-revelation. God can give marvelous signs of grace to God's people without violating natural laws. … God's grace can be understood as taking effect in a way that fully respects the integrity of nature at the physical and biological level as well as at the level of human freedom (Edwards, 2010, p. 89).

Unlike Aquinas, then, Edwards denies that grace supernaturally transforms human nature. When God acts, it is always through creatures, respecting their natures which He has circumscribed in the first place. What does this entail for the question of how Christian faith arises? Crucially, it means that a Christian who accepts a naturalistic account of how his beliefs came about is not obliged to deny that those beliefs were caused by God's grace. Theological and scientific accounts are ultimately compatible.

But there is a price to pay. For one might naturally be led to question whether the words "grace" and "miracle" retain any distinctive meaning in this solution. If grace does not transform human nature, then what does it do? If God never acts in such a way as to alter or circumvent the natural order, then what are miracles? My general suggestion would be to emphasise the subjective nature of grace and the miraculous: to say that something is a miracle, or a work of grace, is to express in theological language how one experiences—or *sees as*—certain phenomena. Here it may be instructive to invoke Espen Dahl's (2018) comparison between two views of the miraculous: that of Augustine and that of Ludwig Wittgenstein.

In one of his early works, Augustine defined miracles as "something strange and difficult which exceeds the expectation and capacity of him who marvels at it" (Augustine, 2014, p. 320). In this definition, the quality of miraculousness is relative to one's understanding of the phenomenon and the way one experiences it, rather than to the event being caused without the mediation of natural causes. Interestingly, as Dahl notes, Augustine's thinking on miracles evolved over the course of his career. This was a result of his thinking through the implications of the Incarnation (Dahl, 2018, pp. 98–100). Augustine came to the position that recurring, ordinary events that are not necessarily beyond our understanding can also be experienced as miracles, that is, that they can evoke marvel, wonder, and awe:

> A dead man has risen again; men marvel: so many are born daily, and none marvels. If we reflect more considerately, it is a matter of greater wonder for one to be who was not before, than for one who was to come to life again (Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of St. John* VIII.1, as quoted by Dahl, 2018, p. 101).

The reason that we do not usually experience such events as miraculous is that, because of their repeated occurrence, we become accustomed to them and begin to take them for granted. As a result, the "wonder at the recurring evaporates in favor of the spectacular" (Dahl, 2018, p. 104). For Augustine, the miraculousness of an event is revealed when we see it not only with "the eyes of the body" but also with "the eyes of the mind" (i.e. spiritual eyes) (p. 101), as

imbued with "divine strangeness" (p. 109). Seeing an event in this way involves a shift in human perception. Dahl, drawing on Wittgenstein's analyses of aspect--seeing, compares this to the experience of the dawning of an aspect (pp. 105–107). In such an experience, what is familiar and taken for granted is seen in a new way, even though our knowledge of the object has not changed. A classic example is when you begin to see the duck-rabbit figure as a picture of a duck (even though you had previously only seen it as a picture of a rabbit). In a similar way, Dahl suggests, we can begin to see as miraculous some events that we previously found unremarkable and mundane:

> … that miracles or wonders tend to "light up", presupposes that there is a habitual way of seeing things that is already established. This is part of the point of Augustine's speaking of the eyes of the body, in so far as we usually take the world as predictable and with habits at our disposal that make it familiar to us (Dahl, 2018, p. 107).

Let us now apply these observations to the subject of Christian faith. Coming to faith can be *seen as* miraculous (i.e., eliciting wonder and marvel) or as a work of grace (i.e., as a divine gift). It is rather easy to understand how this might happen in cases of sudden, unexpected religious conversions such as the ones described by William James in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*:

> … how real, definite, and memorable an event a sudden conversion may be to him who has the experience. Throughout the height of it he undoubtedly seems to himself a passive spectator or undergoer of an astounding process performed upon him from above. … Theology, combining this fact with the doctrines of election and grace, has concluded that the spirit of God is with us at these dramatic moments in a peculiarly miraculous way, unlike what happens at any other juncture of our lives (James, 2004, p. 178).

But there are other examples of becoming a Christian where the process is gradual and much less spectacular. And many believers wouldn't even admit that they have gone through such a process at all; insofar as they know, their

faith has always been there, as something straightforward and taken for granted. For such believers, it may take more effort to see their faith as miraculous or as a work of grace. But such a change in perception is possible for them too. One could hypothesise that, in their case, to see their faith as a miracle or a divine gift would be to see the contingency of the whole scenario in which they became Christians. It is, after all, a contingent fact that they were born into a Christian family, were exposed to credibility enhancing displays when growing up, or encountered convicing arguments streghtening their Christian belief. Nothing was necessary in such a scenario; and to see it as contingent can give rise to marvel and wonder, as well as gratitude to God, who set the whole scenario up in this way.

On my proposed approach, then, to say that Christian faith is miraculous or that it is a work of grace is to express a particular way in which it may be seen as by a believer. One great virtue of such a subjectivist account of theological categories is that it does not lead to a conflict with scientific accounts of faith. One can maintain that there are good naturalistic explanations of how one becomes a Christian, but deny that these explanations are ultimately irreconcilable with theological accounts. At the same time, there remains a robust sense in which God is active in the production of faith, so that faith remains a gift from God. However, this does not imply that faith results from special divine action or that it is miraculous in some objective sense involving God's transformation of human nature.

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Book Review of *Charismatic Leadership in Organizations: A Critique of Texts*, by Iga Maria Lehman. New York and London: Routledge, 2025

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As stated in the pages of this well-crafted monograph, charisma was once "thought by the ancient Greeks to have something of a divine gift about it" (Lehman, 2025, p. 46). Indeed, evidence of the timelessness of the curiosity surrounding

charisma was shown when its abbreviated 21st century incarnation ("rizz") was selected as the 2023 Oxford Word of the Year (see Oxford University Press, 2023). Yet, despite charisma's seeming ubiquity over millennia, little research has been done to date on the precise intersection that *Charismatic Leadership in Organizations: A Critique of Texts* addresses—namely, on the theoretical and empirical discussions relating to charisma, leadership, and academic writing. An associate professor at WSB University in Dąbrowa Górnicza (Poland), Iga Maria Lehman has a dual academic and research background in linguistics as well as in management and organization studies. Thus, as her previous work demonstrates (e.g. Lehman, 2018; also Lehman et al., 2024, etc.), she is excellently placed to tackle the subject matter at hand.

Comprising 129 pages, the volume is part of the prestigious Routledge Studies in Leadership Research series[1]. It begins with a short Preface (pp. xi–xiv), by the distinguished organizational communications scholar T. Fairhurst. This paves the way for the opening chapter, entitled 'Language and Leadership' (pp. 1–16)[2], where Lehman first recapitulates the necessary context on language and discourse as social practices and how these relate to the specific discipline of management and organization studies. She then discusses the relevant literature on leadership, noting it as a "fuzzy concept" (Lehman, 2025, p. 10) and aligning herself with Grint (2010) in defining it in terms of position, purpose, result, and process. This then segues into a presentation of discursive leadership and its presentation through framing and reflexivity, leading to the insightful comparison of leader/follower vs. writer/reader. In drawing attention to how scholarly text production can also be considered as a form of leadership, Lehman highlights how this perspective, given the importance of ideological standpoints in the discipline, is particularly relevant for management and organization studies.

The second chapter, 'Scholarly writing on management and organizations' (pp. 17–43), opens by contrasting positivist and interpretivist approaches to

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[1]　For more information, please see: https://www.routledge.com/Routledge-Studies--in-Leadership-Research/book-series/RSLR.

[2]　This chapter of the book is available in open access via OAPEN—for more information, please see: https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/93197.

scientific analysis, using this to outline the subjective way that authorial identity can be constructed. This is then followed by a recapitulation of the pressures inherent in the 'publish or perish' approach to scholarly research and production, which seems to be a hallmark of many modern academic systems. As with many other disciplines, for management and organization studies researchers this includes the ever-present need to publish in highly-ranked indexed journals often linked to Anglo-American academic traditions. Therefore, this leads to the concomitant requirement to conduct and report research in ways acceptable to Anglophone academia which, as Lehman illustrates, affects many aspects of authorial style and approaches to scholarly writing. In exhorting academic authors to write reflectively and to also consider the role of the reader of such texts, Lehman outlines the importance of the context of how texts are produced, as well as adherence to disciplinary norms, and the challenges that reporting qualitative work can bring.

The distinguishing characteristics of a charismatic leader are highlighted in the opening of the third chapter, 'The quest for charisma in scholarly writing about management and organizations' (pp. 44–59). Here, Lehman summarises previous academic work on charisma, and links it to writing on charisma within leadership studies, noting the importance of adopting a culturally-sensitive approach. This is then followed by an analysis of leadership in academic writing, including the author's positionality, which Lehman recapitulates in her innovative three-layer model of writer identity (Lehman, 2018).

The penultimate chapter, 'A blueprint for charismatic writing in management and organizations' (pp. 60–75), presents a valuable template which distils the expertise outlined in the volume's first three chapters. It opens with a detailed analysis of the rhetorical features (voice, pistis, and metadiscourse, as well as the role of metaphors, stories, and personal accounts) that Lehman identifies as crucial in creating textual charisma in scholarly writing. This is followed by an integrative framework—presented as a helpful table (Lehman, 2025, pp. 71–72)—which underlines the necessary requisite factors to generate leader charisma through texts: ethical appeal, the use of rhetorical traits, and by the deployment of selected rhetorical tactics. These aspects are all illustrated by both shorter and longer examples which are subsequently analysed, therefore

providing useful guidance regarding the successful usage and generation of textual charisma.

By presenting the results of an empirical study, the book's final chapter (pp. 76–102) demonstrates—in an applied manner—all of the theoretical features that Lehman has previously described. This quantitative-based study aimed to see how postgraduate students and academic staff (n=130) fared in identifying and evaluating the issue of authorial voice in selected academic writings taken from a corpus of highly-ranked peer-reviewed journals in management and organization studies. In providing the statistical analysis of the online questionnaire, this study consistently found interesting patterns, with discernible differences in line with the different scholarly stages surveyed (MA and PhD students vis-à-vis assistant and full professors). The volume is completed by an appendix comprising the survey questions, an index, and a full list of the more than 300 references cited in the book.

In summary, there are numerous reasons to recommend *Charismatic Leadership in Organizations: A Critique of Texts*, notably because the work itself represents an outstanding example of textual charisma. Lehman successfully blends theoretical and empirical approaches (as well as qualitative and quantitative perspectives) in a book that is eloquently written, informative, and insightful. Noting the paucity of previous monographs on textual charisma, this book can therefore be considered a pioneering and important contribution to the discipline. In a world where academic production seems to be constantly increasing (e.g., see The Economist, 2024), Iga Maria Lehman's volume encourages scholarly writers in management and organization studies to pursue a different, more reflective, and reader-conscious approach to their work. It is, therefore, recommended as a must-read not only for specialists in management, but also for researchers in linguistics, scholarly communication, and the wider social sciences. As exemplified by the novel framework on textual charisma, the handy practical hints grounded in deep analysis will surely be invaluable to all scholars—from students to professors—who seek to enhance their research by generating greater impact in their academic writing for publication.

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