Academic Freedom, Recognition, and Pluralism – Philosophical Remarks on Impact

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Introduction

- I want to address the significance of **academic freedom** – in relation to **recognition** and **pluralism** – regarding the question of **impact**.

- These thoughts are based on my experience as the former Director of the HCAS (2009-2015) and my current role as, among other things, a member and vice-chair of the Research Council for Culture and Society at the Academy of Finland (2016-2018).

- However, I'm approaching this as a **philosophical** issue rather than an administrative or (merely) political one.
  - Cf. Ilkka Niiniluoto: science policy as "applied philosophy of science".

Impact and the Academy of Finland

AF strategy: "*The Academy of Finland promotes high quality, high impact and responsible research as well as the practical application of this research and the knowledge and skills it generates.*"

(http://www.aka.fi/en/research-and-science-policy/strategy/)

Criteria for funding decisions:

"In selecting projects to fund, we apply seven main criteria:

- scientific quality, innovativeness and novelty of the research plan
- **scientific impact of the research**
- competence of the applicant/the research team
- feasibility of the research plan
- quality and strengthening of the research environment
- international and national research collaborations, researcher mobility
- project's significance for the promotion of professional research careers."

(http://www.aka.fi/en/review-and-funding-decisions/funding-decisions/decision-criteria/)

Impact and AF (cont'd)

- The applicants are expected to include in their research plans:

"Effects and impact beyond academia

- The reach and potential utilization value of the research beyond the scientific community

- The applicant's own estimate of the potential for societal impact in the long or short term"

(http://www.aka.fi/en/funding/how-to-apply/appendices-required/research-plan-guidelines/)

See also: AF report, *The State of Scientific Research in Finland 2016,* special theme: "Broader impact of research in society", http://www.aka.fi/globalassets/30tiedepoliittinen-toiminta/tieteentila/aka_tieteen_tila_2016_eng_150317.pdf.

Impact and AF (cont'd)

AF Q&A:

- **"Does the Academy want to steer research towards having more impact beyond academia?**

- No. Our goal is to encourage researchers to take note of the potential that exists for impact beyond academia and in that way to help them position their research in relation to the surrounding scientific community and society at large. Impact can take many different forms. In the long term, research may generate significant, unexpected impact in an unpredictable and unforeseeable direction. Consequently, there are no reasonable grounds to steer scientific research towards a single, recognisable impact. It is not our ambition, nor is it our objective."

- For more details, see: http://www.aka.fi/en/research-and-science-policy/effects-and-impact-of-research/impact-beyond-academia-in-academy-of-finland-research-funding/.

The many faces of impact

- Academic (scientific, scholarly) impact requires a **(very) long time scale**:
  - Expectations of immediate impact create problems in science policy.
  - What is the "impact" of, say,
    - Enlightenment philosophy? (universal human rights, US Constitution, …)
    - Medieval theology? (the emergence of modern logic, enabling logico-mathematical advancements in the 19th and 20th centuries…)
    - Aristotle? (the emergence of a number of scientific fields existing today…)
    - Finnish scholars' and humanists' ideas in the 19th century? (the emergence of Finland as a nation, 100 years independence 2017)
- The impossibility of simply measuring the impact of creative scientific discoveries and scholarly insights – **against the obsession with measurement**!
  - Measuring is particularly difficult in the humanities and social sciences.
  - Note that impact can also be morally problematic (or catastrophic):
    - Modern physics -> atom bomb.
    - Marx's and Engels's philosophical ideas -> communism, Soviet Union.

The many faces of impact (cont'd)

- Impact
  - within one's own academic field, among one's colleagues and peers
  - within the academic world more widely
  - within society at large
  - …
- When discussing impact, we should not merely discuss direct or straightforward impact – either within the academia or more generally in society – but appreciate the many **indirect** ways in which research can have impact.
  - We should also examine the rather concrete physical and social/administrative environments as well as the semantic and linguistic contexts within which we do academic work.
  - A continuous creation and maintenance of **intellectual environments** (concrete and abstract) is part of impact.

Academic freedom: core value in research

- Academic freedom is (should be) a core value of any academic research institutes.
  - For example, institutes for advanced study: "Now that you're a fellow here you can do whatever you want. Seriously."
- **Bottom-up** emergence of research ideas, rather than **top-down** governance of strategic research programs.
  - For a research funding organization (such as the Academy of Finland), this is the best way to ensure long-term (albeit often indirect) impact: not to expect the academic community to react to pre-organized research programs and pre-defined themes but to pose their research questions themselves.
- Academic freedom is **positive freedom** to do things that are experienced as academically valuable from within the academic/scholarly perspective itself, instead of negative freedom to avoid doing what one is told to do.
- Academic freedom should be regarded as *the* key constituent and enabling factor of impact: **truly novel impact needs to acknowledge the unexpected, and academic freedom is a space for unexpectedness**.

Recognition and pluralism

- We should not merely tolerate but **actively recognize others' academic freedom**:
  - Multiplicity of voices (polyphony; cf. Bakhtin on Dostoevsky)
  - Pluralism (cf. William James)
  - Recognizing the marginalized voices (in contrast to trends), analogous to political recognition.
- Monism is the *proton pseudos* of processes leading to the deterioration of intellectual environments and of the potentiality of impact: reducing everything into the same, other voices not heard or listened to.
- Recognition is not merely **administrative** or **methodological** but also **ontological**: we should take seriously others' different (scholarly, scientific) ways of categorizing reality, i.e., different realities. (An active form of **pluralism**.)
- Recognition as a middle path between full endorsement and mere tolerance: positive attitude to otherness and diversity while allowing even heavily critical scholarly debate and disagreement.

Language and metaphors

- The fundamental importance of (academic but also administrative) **language** in creating **conditions for the possibility of genuine impact** and for cherishing academic freedom (cf. Orwell on the deterioration of language and Newspeak): the ways we speak about knowledge and research fundamentally shape our activities of knowledge-seeking by shaping our self-understanding as scholars or inquirers.
    - Especially in our "post-factual" era, we should reaffirm our commitment to the value of truth as a fundamental goal of scientific/scholarly inquiry.
    - This is compatible with having philosophical disagreements about what exactly truth is.
- Richard Rorty ("The Last Intellectual in Europe: Orwell on Cruelty", 1989): take care of freedom, and truth can take care of itself.
    - "Conversation of humankind" – cf. polyphony.

Language and metaphors (cont'd)

- **Metaphors for knowledge (or knowledge-seeking)** are crucial in shaping our understanding of what academic work is all about.
  - Traditional foundationalist metaphors (e.g., architecture).
  - Examples of pluralist and antifoundationalist metaphors:
    - Paradigm (Kuhn)
    - Cable (Peirce)
    - Web of belief (Quine)
    - Corridor (James)
    - Boat afloat on the sea (Neurath)
    - …
- When employing these and related metaphors, we should not overlook the idea that scientific/scholarly inquiry seeks **depth**, not merely horizontal connections/networking.
  - Impact is understood too narrowly if it merely, or even primarily, denotes the ways in which a research project **horizontally** connects with other fields or society at large, etc.
  - **Verticality** is a crucial part of impact.

Conclusion

- The polyphony of (academic) voices defines an area of knowledge- and truth-seeking within which individual scholars and groups of scholars can pursue the truth.
  - By allowing such a polyphony to exist – i.e., by creating and maintaining a **state of academic freedom** – we not only support (horizontal) networking but also enable some individual voices to (vertically) penetrate very deeply into the structure of reality, possibly yielding true impact.
- Recognition itself is a metaphor (and so is, of course, impact): we learn more about the (natural and social) world by **actively recognizing others' perspectives on the world**, including their different ways of categorizing the world, while maintaining a (potentially) critical attitude to those differences.
  - Recognition of otherness may itself be a crucial factor in the enhancement of (possibilities of) impact: in defense of diversity, antireductionism; against measuring everything on the same scale.