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The Ethics of Research Excellence

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ABSTRACT

We here analyse the ethical dimensions of the UK's 'Research Excellence Framework' (REF), the latest version of an exercise which assesses the quality of university research in the UK every seven or so years. We find many of the common objections to this exercise unfounded, such as that it is excessively expensive by comparison with alternatives such as various metrics, or that it turns on the subjective judgement of the assessors. However there are grounds for concern about the crude language in which for example all relevant scholarship becomes called 'research', and publications become 'outputs'. The focus on the impact of research, which was a new feature of the most recent exercise, is particularly problematic, creating as it does a tendency to what Aristotle called *alazony*, self-aggrandisement, on the part of academics. We conclude that the REF is a mixed good from an ethical point of view, and that more could be done to mitigate its more unfortunate features.

Introduction

For those unfamiliar with the assessment of academic research in the UK we begin with a broad-brush description. University academic departments participating (the details are those of the REF rather than its predecessors, though the similarities are greater than the differences) submit up to 4 publications for each member of their staff whom they consider to be 'REF-able', that is whose publications they believe will score well. They also submit a number of 'Impact case-studies', one for roughly every 10 'REF-able' staff. (We return to the capitalisation of Impact and the neologism 'REF-able' below.) These case-studies are carefully evidenced accounts of how the department's research has made a positive difference to the world beyond the academy. The number of them affects the number of publications that can be submitted. For example, a department that had only two case studies would be

unable to put forward the publications of more than 20 staff, however many research-active or even 'REF-able' staff the department contained. Publications were judged on the basis of the three criteria of originality, rigour and significance: the latter indicating specifically academic importance, and not to be confused with Impact. The REF judges made up subject panels of roughly 25 individuals, selected partly on the basis of recommendations from research organisations such as the British Educational Research Association (BERA) and specialised interest groups and subject associations (eg mathematics educators, psychologists of education and so on). The authors of this paper sat on Panel 25 (Education).

The ultimate assessment of the research quality of a department rested largely on its publications (65%). Impact counted for 25%, though as we have indicated the number of Impact case-studies affected how many publications could be submitted. The last element was 'Research environment' (15%): this comprised such things as personal research fellowships, number of PhD students and of new appointments. The overall REF assessment determined a department's income until the next assessment exercise, that is for 6 or 7 years. At least as important as that, however, are the league tables constructed on the basis of the REF ratings, that show the relative standing of the department in the UK. It is largely in the light of these tables that potential research students, including those from the lucrative overseas market, make their applications, and university managers mark out departments for investment, or not. It will be clear how important the REF and its likely successor exercises are to academic success and failure in the UK. It is less easy to convey how they have come to colonise the academic mind and imagination.

We turn now an overview of the wider context in which such research assessment exercises have their roots, before discussing the ethical issues that are the focus of this paper.

1. The emergence of the Research Excellence Framework

In May 2014 almost 100 distinguished academics from across the globe wrote an open letter to Andreas Schleicher¹ condemning the ubiquity of almost universal testing through PISA) and the OECD's complicity with private for-profit organisations who intend profiting from a perceived deficit agenda. Of course the argument between these academics and Schleicher/OECD is profoundly ethical – the problem being that both sides claim that the promotion of human flourishing is at stake. Not content with their domination of the international schools assessment agenda the OECD now promulgates the need for global

university assessment through Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO).² These increasingly ubiquitous moves towards forms of universal output comparisons and their consequent testing regimes have gained a strong hold in universities, traditionally considered to be redoubts of intellectual independence, driven as they were by the largely private curiosities of individual scholars. Indeed many academics (eg Collini 2012, McGettigan 2013) continue to lament what they consider to be the encroachments of an unconstrained Weberian bureaucracy. In a particularly trenchant attack Tarver³ argues that while some of the post-War impulses to expand access to higher education were in themselves morally grounded, successive governments remedied the iniquities of a 'privilege system' by putting in place reward mechanisms and regulations that prioritised quantity over quality and success over challenge. Hence, while the original impulses may have embodied a moral claim to afford opportunity and possibility to those who had not previously had such access, the mechanisms were not only badly thought through but inevitably led to nefarious outcomes and mendacious behaviours, with their denouement in the decline of the Academy as a haven for the life of the mind. As these different ways of thinking about the Academy gained traction not only did teaching have to accommodate itself to their putative egalitarian impulses, so too did scholarship, now generally referred to as research.

Over and against the sceptics are others who argue that the pre-1950s British university was served by and, in turn, served the replication of upper- and upper middle-class privilege and that a mass Higher Education system would bring strong collateral benefits to the whole of society, most especially as the resources of Empire and goods production declined and the UK made the transition to the (inelegantly labelled) knowledge economy. With the decline of the belief that intelligence was hereditary and the exposure of Burt's intelligence tests as a tool in a complex armoury for the replication of privilege, as well as the rise of social theories of class, many on the political Left determined to open up institutions of traditional privilege to a series of more egalitarian strategies. Interestingly, the New Right were equally iconoclastic but for slightly different reasons. They considered —contra Rousseau— that individuals rather than states or collective entities had the prior claim of self-determination with respect to social, cultural and, most importantly, economic choices. Social forces and collectives should not hold individuals back. Moreover, they asserted that the only way to secure the primacy and victory of individual responsibility was to withdraw many of the state-controlled devices and supports that had given rise to what they considered 'welfareism' with its attendant growth in producer capture. This 'producer capture' was, however,

something of a challenge to both the political Left and Right. Those who controlled certain forms of social practice – medicine, law and education, to name but three – were more interested in protecting the privileges and rights of their professional communities rather than providing optimal service for the public. The public, it was argued, was likely to be better served by the introduction of competition between producers, though admittedly the Right favoured free-market competition whilst the Left opted for state-regulated market mechanisms.

The Research Excellence Framework in the UK thus not only emerged during a period of some turbulence in education in general but also marked yet another chapter in what has become an inexorable decline of trust and the concomitant growth of audit (Power, date) in institutional life⁴. Arguably the REF process, as so many other bureaucratic interventions, is simultaneously a product of and contributes to this decline. The funding of university research had been steadily reduced in the years before 1985 and in that year the University Grants Committee (UGC: later to be replaced by the Higher Education Funding Council) announced that the traditional research block grant allocations would be subject to a new quality assessment – the first Research Assessment Exercise (in 1986), whereby universities' subject-based departments or units (also known as 'cost centres') would be assessed primarily through an analysis of the value of their research. Universities knew prior to 1986 that resources were being allocated according to an internal assessment made by the UGC: this exercise would make those allocations more explicit and transparent, given that, amongst other challenges, only a small number of universities had any access to such funding. This greater transparency itself entails an ethically more transparent approach to resource allocation, particularly if transparency is thought to be a primary ethical value in liberal democracies. In any event, over the succeeding three decades the ways in which this exercise has been conducted have changed significantly. In the early days publications were of predominant importance and the grades were allocated to the university department or unit as a whole— no individual's scores were recorded. Subsequently research climate and culture and evidence of esteem assumed independent significance and each was scored separately. The most recent iteration has seen the removal of the category esteem (always a difficult category to assess as it so often depended on connections rather than demonstrable ability) and its replacement with Impact, about which we shall have more to say below. Perhaps Impact⁵ was introduced to indicate the importance of university work benefiting the wider community in the kind of terms the wider community would readily understand. Perhaps it

was introduced as the result of a compromise in 2010 with the Government Treasury, which was pressing for the replacement of these costly assessment exercises with a simpler system based on proxies such as citations. This is often alleged to have been the case, though we can find no hard evidence for it.

Given the growing insistence on the measurement of performance, the particular impulse to develop an assessment mechanism for research can be read in a number of ways. First, as we have noted, it makes a claim to greater transparency in resource allocation. Secondly, it can be construed as an attack on the vested interests of a small professional elite who were effectively acting as a cartel and as one more ‘conspiracy against the laity’, in the words of George Bernard Shaw (1906). Thirdly, it could be claimed from a different perspective that this was a means by which the academic community could create a pre-emptive strike, since, as things turned out, the exercise would be policed by the academic community itself. No doubt there are other readings but these four offer some insight into the complexity of motivation and each, or certainly the first three, might be considered as underpinned by ethical concerns, even if there is disagreement about their precise nature. In what follows we try to consider what these might be and what, if any, other ethical considerations come into play in evaluating not only the establishment but, perhaps more importantly, the conduct and effects of the Research Excellence Framework.

2. Protocols and wider matters: the nature of ethics

It might seem that we should first define or at least indicate what we mean by ‘ethics’ before coming on to the more substantial matter of weighing the REF against it. But what is at stake here is partly a sufficiently adequate and rich conception of ethics. It is common, especially in the world of Education, for ‘ethics’ to be seen as a matter of optional (bolt-on) issues, professional protocols of a largely routine nature, that can be treated in a tick-box fashion. For example: in the context of research ethics we are likely to ask, were interviewees’ identities anonymised? Was their consent obtained in writing? Was data stored securely? It is a sad comment on academic life that ethics tends to be seen largely as the domain of Ethics Committees, which focus on such necessary but banal questions as these. Such Committees would be unlikely to reject a proposed project on, say, a new strategy for evaluating children’s performance in literacy tests on the grounds that such an approach to literacy is complicit with a culture of league-tables and testing that is potentially damaging and counter-

productive, and almost certainly anti-educational. Such large questions are no doubt beyond their remit. Hence we have the irony of Ethics Committees refusing to consider important ethical issues at all.

There is by contrast a long tradition according to which the subject-matter of ethics is very broad. To adopt a well-known way of putting it from Plato (*Republic* 352d) it concerns nothing less than how we should live. ‘We are not addressing a trivial question’, he has Socrates say, ‘but the question of how to live a life’ (*hontina tropon chrē zēn*). Mary Midgley (1981) offers a helpful perspective on this. Ethics, she writes, is not a label for just ‘one kind of serious consideration among many’ (p. 106), as though we might discuss separately the ethics of the REF, the politics of the REF, the economics of the REF, and so on. Ethics is, as she puts it, the name for ‘the whole country’ (p. 117) and not for one part of it only. Ethical thinking involves ‘stepping back from all the partial systems and looking at their relation to each other’ (p. 130).⁶

In this very broad and wide-ranging conception of ethics many philosophers have emphasised the importance of judgement and the need to bring flexibility and attention to bear on the details of particular cases that confront us from time to time. In a famous passage Aristotle compares the flexibility of judgement with a device developed on the island of Lesbos: a builder’s comb still used today to transfer the pattern of the frame of a door, for instance, to flooring in order to mark what needs to be cut away:

What is itself indefinite can only be measured by an indefinite standard, like the leaden rule used by Lesbian builders; just as that rule is not rigid but can be bent to the shape of the stone, so a special ordinance is made to fit the circumstances of the case. (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1137b27-32, trans. Ross, 1969)

It is thus characteristic of ethics that it does not, for the most part, consist of general laws comparable with those of science: as if it was best conceived as the attempt to reach a high level of generality, to be encapsulated in ethical principles and ethical codes. For Aristotle the significant moral or ethical questions concerned not only what we should do and what principles we should follow, but what aspects of character we should think of as admirable and to be cultivated, and what aspects we should repudiate and hope not to find in ourselves, our friends, colleagues or children.

Thus the ‘whole country’ can be conceived in Plato’s terms as a matter of asking what difference the REF makes to how we live: ‘we’ here meaning university academics, as well

as the students that we teach, and the wider community or communities that are affected, for good or ill, by the research we carry out. Do we live more flourishing lives because of the REF, or lives that are diminished? In short, do our lives go better because of it, or worse? In the Aristotelian tradition, as noted above, this broadest of approaches can be thought of as an enquiry into character: what qualities of character are rewarded by the REF, what kinds of people it calls into being and whether, on reflection, these are the kind of people we want to be and to have around us, in universities and elsewhere. The significance of this will emerge in the last three sections of the paper.

3. Objections to the REF

There are arguments against the very existence of the REF, with implications for future funding of research and selectivity. Many of them are familiar (see e.g. Sayer, 2014). First there is the cost: conservatively put at £47m to universities themselves, in collecting the appropriate evidence and appointing managers and research administrators for this purpose, £12m to the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) in administrative costs, plus the incalculable opportunity costs of time devoted to the REF that could have been spent in the library or the laboratory producing more and better scholarship or even spent teaching students. Worse yet the most recent estimates suggest at least £250m (Else 2015), with the most pessimistic figures in excess of £500m (Jump 2015). This is properly to be thought of as an ethical matter and not just a financial one since it concerns universities' obligations and responsibilities and the extent to which they are doing what they exist to do. Secondly, such exercises may be considered as benefitting those who 'play the game' most effectively, for example by submitting work on the latest fashionable themes, rather than those who do the best research or indeed the research that might bring long term benefits to bear on the community as a whole. Indeed this game-playing has corrosive effects that militate against both the principles of wholeness and those of duty. And this because large numbers of staff are excluded on prudential grounds with the concomitant claim in many institutions that this does not affect one's career. Thirdly, they militate against slow and patient research that cannot be guaranteed to come to fruition and publication within the time-frame of a research assessment exercise, and against risk-taking: that is, working on an area of research which might have spectacular results but equally might come to nothing. On the Platonic view of ethics we might ask ourselves whether we want games-playing, short-term thinking and

aversion to risk to be a significant part of the lives we lead in universities; on the Aristotelian one, we might ask whether we might want to reward, favour and promote people who are good at playing games, exploiting trends and valorising the superficial: that is, cynical manipulators of a system rather than academics as they have traditionally been conceived as disinterested seekers after of truth and authenticity.

None of these objections is entirely convincing, however, despite the occasional and egregious moral lapses of some university administrators⁷. It would be naïve to expect government to allow universities to revert to a world in which there was no assessment of the research they produced when the distribution of what have become scarce resources can be seen to come at the expense of some of the most marginalised and impoverished in the community at large. Alternative forms of assessment, for instance the use of proxies such as citations or the standing of journals, are far more open to ‘gaming’ in the form of mutual citation agreements, or focusing on the topic of the moment and taking a controversial line about it (to which numerous people will then respond, duly citing you). Allocating quality-related (QR) funding via the research councils (such as the Economic and Social Research Council or ESRC) instead of the REF, an alternative that commends itself to some, would in fact cost roughly five times as much as the REF (Wilsdon 2015) and the opportunity costs of submitting bids to the research councils, with the demoralisation that accompanies failure to secure funding, are already enormous. There are celebrated examples of ‘outlier’ researchers, who published little for long periods, such as the particle physicist Peter Higgs and of course Ludwig Wittgenstein: these do indeed present a problem, but they do so for any form of research assessment and not just for the REF. It is worth noting that it is not the REF itself that would terminate the career of an apparently inactive researcher anyway but the university and its managers, no doubt claiming that the REF makes hard decisions inevitable.

There are some sound ethical reasons for supporting the continuing existence of a national research exercise such as the REF. At the national policy level in the UK the REF is a significant instrumental in research being regarded as a major activity in all (or nearly all) universities and departments. The ethical issue here is partly one of equity. The previous Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in 2008 concluded that there were ‘pockets of excellence’ everywhere in the UK university sector (and not, for instance, only in an elite group of universities). Research assessment helps to secure the links between research and teaching, if only at the level of rhetoric: we are all in favour of research-led teaching, though there are different interpretations of this phrase. To spell this important point out further, the

REF and its predecessors have made it difficult to demarcate ‘research-only’ (and teaching-only) universities, with the deleterious consequences – construction of hierarchies, demoralisation of the teaching-only sector (and, it must be said, demoralisation of the research-only sector for those research-active staff that enjoy and value teaching) – that would follow from this. And to labour the point raised earlier, post 1992 Universities had no access at all to such funds before the advent of the RAE. These are strong reasons for continuing the REF in something like its present form.

4. Judgement and subjectivity

One particularly interesting objection to the REF is that the evaluations made, of publications in particular, came down to the subjective judgements of individual members of the Panels, with the further complaint that they could not in all cases possibly have been competent to evaluate every piece of work that they read. The point is regularly taken as the basis of an argument for the use of proxies such as citations. The idea of judgment is not popular in our time, though more usually this is because its exercise is equated with judgmentalism and moralising (Smith, 2014). Here however the use of judgement is equated with subjectivism and subjective preference, as if a Panel member’s verdict was on a level with preferring one kind of cheese or beer over another. But Panel members were recruited on the basis of expertise and experience: they had been referees for journals and journal editors themselves, they had refereed submissions to research councils and so on. Professional judgement, though it can be faulty from time to time, is not the same as subjective preference. Those making this equation would presumably not accept that their marking of student essays or their work as PhD examiners came down to the exercise of mere personal preference.

Now if all judgement is subjective then the point can be used the other way round: those arguing against the use of judgement are simply registering *their* subjective preference, and can be safely ignored. The point can be made too that the use of judgement in this and similar exercises is one way in which the professional expertise of the academic profession continues to be valorised and is developed and refined, which would not be the case if proxies were used. This particular concern applies even where there is a correlation between citations and REF scores such as in Physical, Biological and Medical Sciences and Engineering as well as some Social Sciences such as Economics. As for the complaint that Panel members must sometimes have been evaluating papers that lay outside of their expertise, in fact – in the case

of Panel 25 at any rate – such papers were passed on to those who were better qualified to make the appropriate judgement; and the complaint of course effectively admits on principle that there is such a thing as relevant expertise in this context. In any event much cross-moderation and calibration was undertaken.

5. The ethics of language

The nomenclature of the REF is in many ways unfortunate. The word ‘research’ is too readily taken to imply empiricism, the discovery of new facts and the analysis of data (however trivial) rather than, say, fresh thinking, the clarification of ideas, the re-evaluation of familiar orthodoxies, the finding of unexamined lines of interest in a classic writer. The word ‘research’ makes it easy – and appealing, to certain tendencies in university departments and schools of Education – to forget that, in the context of Education, non-empirical disciplines such as philosophy count as research (see Smeyers and Smith 2014), as can mixed disciplines such as sociology, or history. The REF itself was emphatically not guilty of this. Indeed the myriad forms of scholarship to be found in universities was everywhere evident and, when judged to be so, deemed ‘excellent’.⁸

The shibboleth ‘excellence’ positions all research against some fantasised, almost Platonic ideal, as if the significant things about a highly-rated piece of research might not be that it is interesting, disconcerting, thought-provoking and so on. Perhaps ‘excellence’ is simply the result of a search for a term so neutral (so empty) that it could provide a common standard against which all might be commensurable. Yet even this tends to make the diversity of research less than visible. Do the latest work on gravitational waves and a radical reinterpretation of Montaigne really sit on the same scale, differing only in having less or more of the same excellence? Perhaps not, but surely that is the point of ‘professional expertise’ and the context-laden specificity of judgment. When, in everyday parlance, someone opines that a particular artistic performance was excellent or that their exquisitely prepared ‘welsh rarebit’ was excellent or again, that so-and-so gave an excellent account of the impact of microbial life on the digestive tract we understand that the criteria for determining the truth of the claim will lie in certain (loose) canons of recognition.

A ‘framework’ can be either a neutral and innocuous skeleton on which things of more substance can be hung, or it can be an all-embracing structure, an endless web from which there is no escape and which we struggle to unweave even during the night: a *Penelopewerk*

by which we attempt to postpone the forced marriage to our suitors – business, industry, the market – and keep alive the memory of when things were different and the hope that they might be so again.

Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, has complained that the REF employs a barbaric language of ‘control, closure and somewhat crudely crafted measurement’.⁹ ‘Outputs’ supplies an obvious if excellent example. The word was presumably chosen because a performance or a video, for example, could be submitted as well as a book, or a chapter of a book, or a journal article. But ‘outputs’ are the cousins of widgets and have their home in the input-output models of industrial processes. No better word could have been chosen if the desired effect was to make publications appear the outcome of a mechanistic process, eminently suitable to be overseen by university ‘research managers’ with little understanding of what they are managing, and only concerned to count and quantify. Ironically ‘outputs’ is, in any event, a fairly meaningless term when applied to so very many different kinds of intellectual endeavour. Just as the noun ‘university’ (especially in its contemporary instantiation) might be considered a flaccid designator, intimating a loose coalition of scholarly endeavours, so too with research and its associated terms. Yet, just as ‘university’ designates something recognisably material, so too with outputs and it is not easy to bring forward a pithy alternative, given that the entire process is intended to normalise all scholarly activity as the product of the *knowledge worker*. Language matters, and the task for those who resist from adopting such an apparently mechanistic discourse is to provide alternative possibilities given that there are reasonable ethical arguments in favour of continuing with something like a REF exercise.

6. Impact

In the course of the 2000s a widespread unease emerged, primarily amongst academics working in professional fields, that applied research was marginalised in early iterations of the RAE. This coincided with a rising government concern that, in a time of constrained resources, the public investment in research should manifestly (and directly) conduce to the creation of tangible public goods. Hence, to repeat, the 2014 REF for the first time allocated a (20%) weighting to ‘Impact’, the requirement to demonstrate how its research benefits the wider, and specifically non-academic, community. However there are, first, obvious difficulties in demonstrating such research benefits, especially for a Humanities department,

of History or English Literature, say, though Pure Mathematics will have similar problems in attempting to *show* the wider effects of its work, and of course its economic impact in particular, beyond the world of education. The implicit model seems to be that of working with an industrial partner to invent a light-sabre, or to discover and exploit a new lubricant for artificial hip joints. Even in the more applied elements of humanities and Social Sciences there are very real dangers in assuming that evidence of strong impact carries some kind of intrinsic good. The unseemly attachment of legislators to the (falsely claimed) efficacy of synthetic phonics is an interesting example of the sometime rupture in the fabric of impact. Small scale, partial and incomplete studies of synthetic phonics in places such as Clackmannanshire¹⁰ have enjoyed high impact status, shaping subsequent government policy, despite enjoying none of the claimed efficacy.

A second, and arguably more pressing, difficulty is that the idea of impact, despite its relatively minor standing in the REF, seems to have come to dominate the academic imagination. Perhaps academics always secretly longed to be big players in ‘the real world’; perhaps economic impact that can be set out on a spread-sheet is the only thing likely to impress the new kinds of managers and administrators that run universities, and researchers in search of promotion and favour know who it will pay them to side with. At any rate academics from many disciplines are now confusing – whether through deliberate misconstrual, fantasy or honest misunderstanding – the highly specific, and limited, Impact dimension of the REF with the very different criteria for publications. (To repeat and emphasise: the criterion of ‘significance’ in publications did not mean ‘Impact’ in the sense that the REF used the term.) It is common these days to hear people asserting that ‘it’s all about impact now’, or priding themselves on the usefulness of their research by contrast with people who merely write journal articles or books.

The prioritisation of impactful research thus goes hand in hand with the demotion of what is sometimes called ‘blue skies’ or ‘curiosity-driven’ research whose only criterion is academic merit. The very idea of purely academic worth or merit is at stake here: a vague and hardly operationalisable notion, it will be said, compared to the possibility of measuring ‘impact’ objectively in terms of the invention of light sabres, improved artificial hip joints and their equivalents. Thus the very idea of the university as a place dedicated to academic work, with the complex criteria against which such work is judged and which the work itself constantly challenges and develops, is becoming replaced by a different idea of the university, as a handmaid of industry, commerce and government policy.¹¹

A refinement of the obsession with ‘impact’ involves the growing assumption that academics should prioritise the impact of their research from the outset rather than trying to create it after the work’s completion: a remarkable idea which seems to rule out the possibility of open-mindedness on the part of the researcher from the start.¹² This resembles what is sometimes called ‘sponsorism’: grants from outside the university become the only way to buy time to do research. Academics thus increasingly design their research programmes in the light of what they have reason to think outside bodies – charities, research councils, industry – will fund, rather than, as they once did, identifying an interesting field of enquiry and then looking for sources of funding where appropriate. Otherwise there would be no chance of achieving ‘impact’ at all.

7. Alazony

The demand for impact, or the prioritising of Impact, casts as marginal the researcher who is modest or diffident, who thinks they ought to have something important to say before they contribute to the mountain, electronic or otherwise, of books and journal articles. Self-importance and self-aggrandisement, the ‘bigging up’ that has now entered the language, become chief among the academic virtues. Aristotle has some illuminating things to say in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*) about what he calls the vice of alazony (*alazoneia*), which stands at an extreme on one side of truth-telling while irony does on the other. Irony, Aristotle says, conceals too much while alazony asserts too much. The *alazôn* is the kind of person who exaggerates his qualifications. If he has no ulterior purpose in doing so he is ‘feeble rather than bad’ (trans. Ross).¹³ If he does so because he wants to win fame or honour, we should not censure him excessively: the person who boasts for the sake of riches or worldly goods is more disreputable.¹⁴ The problem with the *alazôn* is not that he makes the wrong choice of ends, nor even that he selects the wrong means for achieving them from time to time. The problem is that he has a settled disposition to behave like this: *alazoneia* is in his character. This is what we dislike in him (*NE* 1127b 16-17).¹⁵

Aristotle seems here to be thinking indifferently of the person who exaggerates his qualifications (he has them, but not to the extent that he claims) and the person who is lying outright. Translators generally favour the word ‘boasting’, no doubt because we can boast both about what we have and what we don’t have. Hutchinson captures this neatly: ‘the pretentious man [his translation of *alazôn*] claims the things that bring renown when he does

not have them, or claims more of them than he has' (1986 p. 102). This is what is objectionable in the demand that every scholar or researcher should demonstrate 'impact'. It is not just that it leads them to exaggerate their impact when they have little, or to lay claim to it when they have none to speak of. It is simply that it turns them into professional boasters: and this, as Aristotle notes (*NE* 1127b9), is wearisome (Ross and Thomson both use this word in their translations).

One of the merits of Aristotle's account of the virtues is that his idea of the mean that lies between excess and deficiency helps us to see what we lose when we fall victim to a vice at either extreme. The *alazôn*, on top of his boastfulness, exhibits 'Failure to recognize irony, especially due to arrogance, misplaced self-confidence, or a lack of self-awareness' (*Oxford English Dictionary*), while the ironic person misses the truth by excessive understatement ('I'm one of those academics whose work gets read by three people, one of them my mother') and may mislead the innocent and the literally minded.

Aristotle's *eirôneia* is usually translated as 'irony'. Ross prefers 'mock-modesty', presumably to avoid the complex connotations of the modern sense of 'irony'. In fact *eirôneia* seems in Aristotle's time to have been moving towards the more modern sense from its older meaning, captured by Ross, which also conveys an intention to deceive (Muecke 1970 pp. 15-16); and of course Aristotle had before him the example of Socrates's irony, to which he refers (*NE* 1127b25), as well as Plato's (to which he generally seems obtuse). On Aristotle's account the ironic person is not automatically to be condemned equally with the *alazôn*. The mean is always 'relative to us'. Just as, in Aristotle's favourite analogy, the archer may take account of a cross-wind and aim a little to the side of the target (cp. Losin, 1987), so the person who tries to stand right with regard to truth-telling may lean a little to the side of irony. This will be the case when his culture has become particularly alazonic. Thus Aristotle observes that the ironic are more attractive (*chariesteroi*) in character (*NE* 1127b22-3): 'Those who make a moderate use of understatement, treating ironically of subjects not too commonplace or obvious, make the better impression'. Aristotle finishes his short account of alazony by declaring flatly that the *alazôn* is *cheirôn*, worse – that is, worse than the ironical person. This, then, is the kind of person whose hour comes round at last, whom the demand for impact sends, vainglorious and exaggerating, to our new academic Bethlehem to be born.

8. Conclusion

Of course, with the inevitability of revision, the REF will now go through a further iteration under the Stern Review¹⁶. Each iteration of the RAE/REF has been followed by some kind of review, creating larger transaction costs (as institutions have to re-think their strategies and processes), institutional disruption and personal insecurity as universities and their academics alike tack and weave to secure positional advantage. The ubiquity of the discourses and practices of change (and change management) suggest that no social or cultural activity is to be afforded stability. As Masschelein (2001) observes, the political discourse within which education is ensnared is itself subordinated to the imaginary of endless process where change (a disruptor of the malfeasance of the status quo) assumes the guise of a moral and prudential category. There is no settled point (provisional, or otherwise); no still point in a heraclitian world – all is in flux and the flux itself is afforded a superior moral status.

From metacognition to Lifelong Learning, curriculum construction to technology, education has become subject to the conceit that the process is the project. There is no completion, fulfilment, resolution or endpoint; indeed rarely a pause. Rather, we are invited to embrace continuous change as a good (Smith 2016). And the REF has certainly not been immune from these impulses. In its 30 year history no iteration of the REF/RAE has remained unchanged, on the basis that it is driven by the necessity to ever purify the process. Sometimes this is promoted as the means by which the process is to be simplified. For example, collapsing smaller units of assessment into larger ones can appear to be producing these efficiencies whilst largely being a means for establishing extended control over the environment in which judgments are made. This, in turn, further shapes the kinds of prudential judgments made by institutions and individuals and, arguably displaces some of the ethical impulses of the scholar with positional ones.

It will be clear that we believe the REF is a mixed bag from an ethical point of view. While the experience of the conditional makes the application of the categorical strained we hold that the principle of distributed responsibility in a complex liberal democracy is important and that academics cannot determine their own ends and resource allocations without regard to government and taxpayer. Nevertheless we consider that the relationship between the originating impulse and the consequent practices needs more extended consideration. Equally, we have argued that it is better to have such an exercise than any other way of evaluating research, largely because the REF applies Aristotle's 'Lesbian rule' (see above, p. 00), its Panels being unafraid to make academic judgements, and attempting to do so flexibly and with sensitivity to the kind of work that academic research is. More might be done to

prevent the ‘gaming’ of the system, though complete elimination is probably impossible.

Indeed more needs to be done to fulfil the principles of a comprehensive ethic of social practice though it is not clear that institutions will cease and desist! More might be done to reduce the barbaric language, as Rowan Williams puts it, of terms such as ‘excellence’ and ‘outputs’, and in particular of ‘impact’.

Our principal concern is that the introduction of Impact is in danger of changing the character of the people who work in universities: of fundamentally altering the myriad patterns and possibilities of the academic life and how they might be lived, indeed of reducing them to a deracinated core where Professor Lookatme and Dr Loudmouth – long familiar campus figures, of course – broadcast their importance across the ruins. Now, with the university as much inspired by the sort of people who vaunt their ‘skills’ on television’s *The Apprentice* as it is driven by the more unfortunate elements of the REF, those whose research and scholarship is ruminative, patient, serendipitous, counter-cultural, diffident but unafraid must go on speaking, in their own distinctive way, for the values of the university.

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NOTES

¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/may/06/oecd-pisa-tests-damaging-education-academics>

² <http://www.oecd.org/edu/skills-beyond-school/testingstudentanduniversityperformancegloballyoecdsahelo.htm>

³ http://www.ulster.ac.uk/aut/Newspaper_clippings/The%20Decline%20and%20Fall%20of%20the%20British%20University.pdf

⁴ The European Survey of Values (EVS), conducted on a 10-year cycle since 1980, represents the most cogent account of the decline of trust in institutions across a very broad swathe of public institutions and their functionaries. See <http://www.europeanvaluesstudy.eu/>. Clearly much of this scepticism is fuelled by the increasing transparency of informal mechanisms of communications and the ubiquity of online resources.

⁵ We have tried to reserve the capitalised 'Impact' for contexts where Impact Case Studies are being discussed, and the uncapitalised 'impact' for the more vague and general idea that university research should hold benefits for the wider, non-academic community. It has not always been possible to be consistent in this convention, partly because of the leakage between the two terms.

⁶ Midgley here writes of the 'moral' rather than the 'ethical', but as she herself notes nothing hangs on the distinction in this context. Some interesting and thought-provoking discussion of the distinction between the two terms can be found in Bernard Williams (1985).

⁷ One such notable and unfortunate example may be seen in a comment to staff by a former vice Chancellor of Queen's University, Belfast, that 'people who are not performing significantly in research *cost*' the university money

⁸ REF said nice things about phil of ed

⁹ Rowan Williams is quoted in *Times Higher Education*, 29 Jan. 2015 (<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/rowan-williams-on-higher-educations-inhuman-and-divisive-jargon/2018188.article>).

¹⁰ A very small local authority in Scotland where insufficiently robust research was claimed as evidence of the efficacy of teachers adopting synthetic phonics as the preferred modus operandi of language teaching in the primary school

¹¹ This and the two previous paragraphs are adapted from Richard Smith, *Educational research: the importance of the humanities*, *Educational Theory* 2015, in press.

¹² Laurie Taylor satirises this: 'Lies, damned lies and impact', *Times Higher Education*, 18 June 2015, p. 60.

¹³ 'more irresponsible than vicious' (Thomson).

¹⁴ 'is an uglier character' (Ross).

¹⁵ Hutchinson's discussion (1986 pp. 103-4) is illuminating here.

¹⁶ Lord Stern, President of the British Academy and a REF sceptic, was appointed Chair of the review group, the purpose of which is to find ways of streamlining (i.e. reducing the cost) of the process.