

Putting the epistemology back: writing against ontology in HE philosophy

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Abstract

This paper outlines clear signs of market-led instrumentalisation for HE cultures in Britain, before critiquing the ‘ontological turn’ in HE theory and its intrinsic political abdication from those signs. It focuses on a paper by Ronald Barnett to both diagnose the problem, which is a ‘precarité’ that is ghosted in his work, rather than explicitly posited, before identifying a possible new approach to the problems of the ontological turn in post-foundational humanism. This paper also critiques the philosophical use of the ontological turn per se, particularly in the face of a conservative political shift in Britain. It both agrees and differs with Barnett’s advocacy, but ultimately uses his paper as a springboard to an alternative set of philosophical and ethical frameworks that might be offered to replace the ontological turn, along with a full justification. To make that case, this paper outlines the emerging work of Marcus Morgan and the possibility of a neo-humanist, post-foundational turn. This paper ultimately critiques a large philosophical trend within current HE pedagogy, and therefore is of relevance to international HE practitioners of all subjects.

Key words: *education, policy, philosophy, politics, ontology, humanism*

Introduction

In Late October, 2015, an email was sent to all academic and support staff at UK Higher Education Institutions. It briefed them on recent legislation, ‘the Consumer Rights Act 2015’ (CRA) that frames the university as a ‘seller’ and the student as ‘consumer’.

We had finally been disabused of the fantasy of public service in an email warning employees of legislation and ultimately litigation. Staff are now service providers and students consumers. In reality, it has been this way for some time. But with this legal mass-memo, the university in Britain had been finally and fully turned inside-out, to face the market eye-to-eye.

Now, in 2016, the new education bill has been passed through white paper and parliamentary discussion stage. Commentators have noted its willful language of fragmentation and deregulation, which makes the argument here more urgent (see for

instance Scott, 2016). Market advocates such as Peter Ainsworth might be pleased by the new education bill. In the run-up to the 2015 general election in Britain Ainsworth cited the Thatcherite philosophical architect Hayek positively, to back up his proposals for changes to HE structures and funding. Ainsworth explained that:

...a large proportion of what are currently graduate-level jobs may be replaced by computerisation over the coming decades. This calls for a transformation in the role of the university. Rather than simply teach a defined set of knowledge over a three-year period, the relationship needs to become longer-term and more responsive to a rapidly changing work environment. (Ainsworth, 2015b).

He is right in many ways, and this has a much longer history than just recent education research (see for instance Deem, Hillyard and Reem, 2007). The speed of capitalism, built in redundancy and micro-diced divisions of labour, rebound on the demand for different kinds of knowledge required in a global situation. But there is a naturalised assumption here, and in the email received, that is problematic: that the university only exists to serve 'industry', meaning, in post-industrial societies, 'capitalism'.

Ainsworth's vision of the university is one of racehorse stabling and training, although it is also a response to globalisation, and the subsequent blurring of the role of the nation state (Ainsworth, 2015b). He described his proposed scheme as 'a free-market approach', rather than a tax. Student fees would pass directly to the university without government mediation:

With no need for government funding, regulation can be significantly reduced and universities freed to expand and develop new and innovative courses and teaching methods. (ibid).

But what is painted as a 'freedom' here is simply the freedom of the university, like the freed slave, to compete in a market. It is capitalist liberal philosophy as defined and rightly critiqued by Marx *et al* (1976 [1867]). It also neatly defers the problem of dealing with higher education from the state to the market, a situation likely to be felt acutely in Westminster across all parties, with the essential ruination of one politician, Nick Clegg, over his handling of HE policy.

After the new HE bill, this situation is now 'live'. When Ainsworth wrote, the transformation of the public into the private had not fully or finally happened. With the event of the Consumer Rights Act and new HE bill, it effectively has. Private for-profit players such as Pearson now hover over the sector.

But it is what these developments might do to epistemology itself, as universities are turned inside out to the market that might have even more radical ramifications. Lyotard explained how information itself is structured by political *geist* (1980). That information and its uses are framed by historical periods.

These are the main dimensions of Ainsworth's proposals, and the new legal situation, that this paper will address. That the ontological turn in HE educational theory can only serve to bolster this neoliberal-big-markets-and-tiny-state situation. That the uses of teaching will be framed by this historical period and that this historical period is structured by commerce and that ontology is a willing philosophy for this task. But we can change that.

When one starts to try to align, for instance, and from recent experiences, the study of Joseph Beuys to the job market, it becomes fairly clear that a further fundamentalist tightening of what HE knowledge is could be an intrinsic part of the process. Ruskin's 'Education for Education's sake' could not be further from the scene.

These conversations have begun already in Higher Education academic discourse, and some of its more troubling aspects have been explored (see Back, 2014 and 2016). There is also a much deeper history that runs back to Plato's Academy and the way it turned away from the more instrumental schools of Sophistry. But here I want to concentrate on epistemology, the more recent ontological turn in HE, and the 'precarious landscape' of the early 21st Century.

My argument is structured as follows: 1) Introduction; 2) The argument against ontology for HE, via some key theorists of 'the unstable' - Bauman, Beck, Noys *et al*, and in regard to structures of knowledge, via key theorists of the subject such as Lyotard. This second section is itself subdivided into three parts, i) exploring ontology for an unstable world, ii) politics for an unstable world, and iii) the elided subject of 'meritocracy', which is ghosted in Ronald Barnett's work. This section will also address some of the roots of modern ontologies in Heidegger, in order to critique them, before; 3) One proposed 'cure' will then be outlined, via an overview of emerging work on post-foundational humanism and ethics by Marcus Morgan at Cambridge University.

My examples all necessarily relate to the UK HE institutions, but the general argument this paper makes is international. It is aimed at anyone interested in the philosophy of education, specifically the turn to ontology.

The argument against the turn to ontology

Beginning with the political concerns just outlined, I will move through a response to them – namely a paper by Ronald Barnett prepared for HERDSA - before critically sketching in an alternative model, largely in relation to Marcus Morgan's work.

I will argue that we ought to resist a further turn towards the market instrumentalisation of Higher Education, partly by speculating on what might happen to knowledge through these kinds of processes. This is not seminal. Lyotard's work on postmodernism really explored the way knowledge itself was becoming instrumentalised and commodified in an increasingly post-industrial west (Lyotard, 1980). The reason I bring Lyotard in is to explain up-front how the argument here at the broadest level is about the changing structures, uses and qualities of knowledge in this now fully free market sector. I will also argue that we need to teach our students precisely this; that knowledge itself is politically shaped.

At this point it is necessary to criticise the 'ontological turn' for turning away from its inevitably historical circumstances, and political responsibilities, before sketching an alternative set of philosophical resources we might look to, in order to face the onrush of global accumulation and its collateral damage. Put crudely, there isn't enough political responsibility to our students in the ontological turn.

Ontology for an unknown future?

Ronald Barnett's Heideggerian 'Learning for an unknown future' (2012) attempts to shift HE provision away from skill-set teaching, towards an ontology of dealing with an 'unknown future'. Clearly then, there are parallels with Barnett's work and Ainsworth's political advocacy, namely the increasing 'unknowability' of a fast-paced capitalist landscape, something being discussed at its far extremes by contemporary theorists (for instance Noys, 2014). Noys' work is crucial here, as he is a philosopher of an accelerated world, and Barnett advises an ontological turn for that world, but this paper will advise a different turn. For Barnett, the future, it seems, is so incommensurable that epistemology itself is dead. As he says:

...even generic skills, is a cul-de-sac. In contrast, the way forward lies in construing and enacting a pedagogy for human *being*. (2012: 65, italics mine).

What Barnett's paper does very well is describe the previous responses to the rapid changes of an implicitly capitalist landscape. But it could provide more detail, illustrating why that landscape is how it is. What lies under Barnett's advocacy is 'precariousness', labour market short-termism and zero hours contracts (see Candeias, 2008, Näsströma and Kalm, 2014). The 'unknown' and 'unknowable' futureless world

is sketched as a sort of metaphysical void, but, quite contrary to such an argument, we are dealing with a very historical set of circumstances. I am not accusing the paper of being a-historical; rather its historical features seem buried in order to focus on its particular strand of advocacy.

But because of that burial, this paper will argue that Higher Education actually requires a much more politicised, epistemological turn, which attempts to explain the history of the 'futureless' - and therefore the fragmented subject - however incompletely or provisionally it might do so. A turn outwards to public life is required, when a turn inwards to the individual and 'being' was being advised. Barnett provides a telling quote:

“Anxiety”, “fragility”, “chaos”: these are as much characterizations of an *inner* sense of a destabilized world. It is a destabilization that arises from a personal sense that we never can come into a stable relationship with the world. (my italics).

When the world is described as 'fluid', as it is in many research papers, it is often sketched in via a familiar reference to Bauman and Beck. A critical reading of Bauman's work is particularly relevant to the argument being presented here, but these frequent, single line Bauman-Beck underwritings of the fundamental instability of 21st century life (Bauman in Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) not only write it in thinly, but often miss the key nuances, that fluidity is a privilege for some, hell for others, as is fixity (see Bauman, 1998). To say the world is fluid is to simply state that the laws of physics and capital have not ceased. Describing the specifics, the *epistemes*, is where the subject begins.

Because of the language of the 'inner' life in Barnett's paper, it is no surprise that Heidegger (1962) is used as a theoretical response to (essentially) the problem of precarité. Both Beck and Bauman, like Noys, are theorists of the 'unstable' too. They describe the attempt to make private, personal solutions to what are essentially public troubles, and the focus on 'the individual' in a world of instability (see also Mills, 1959). Barnett's paper colludes with this tendency. Beck and Bauman are clear that personal, private solutions can never tackle the problems, but only exacerbate them (Bauman, 1998 and 2001). As C. Wright Mills argued, the social sciences *per se* might begin with these questions (1959).

The broader point to hold on to for our purposes is that a turn to ontology is a turn inwards, when a turn outwards needs to be encouraged in Higher Education cultures, at all levels: We need a return to public debate. Both Barnett's pedagogical advocacy and Ainsworth's policy try to construct a set of coping mechanisms for those set adrift in capitalism. But these are, if they remain subsumed within precarité, always going to

be abstracted in terms of the power structures they are trying to deal with (again Bauman, 1998 and 2001). We now need to be more ambitious than just coping in the face of the crisis.

Barnett's paper is similarly trying to respond to 'futurelessness' and instability from inside its structures, and as it does this it reifies those structures by default, and portrays them as 'natural'. It assumes 'supercomplexity' and 'unknowability' to be the ground on which we stand. This is true in many ways, but I argue against Barnett's idea that we can no longer speak from there, or produce knowledges, plural, epistemologies that adhere. We can also challenge that landscape, but instead, Barnett urges a return to ontology via Heidegger: 'Learning for an unknown future calls, in short, for an ontological turn.' (2012, 65).

Politics for an unknown future?

Barnett is correct in terms of diagnosis, but the crisis in HE, and more widely, clearly requires a political turn – one to a new post-foundational humanism. Tracy Fortune (2012) follows Barnett's paper by asking if we should teach our students 'political acumen', concluding that 'Machiavellian intelligence', although troubling, as it encourages deceit among students, should now be considered in the face of 'supercomplexity'. This, she says, is 'warranted' due to the stressful, agonistic, competitive work lives students face after university.

'Social intelligence' is needed to form 'graduateness' in younger students, but the underlying animal nature of the social world is very real. Arguing for Machiavellian intelligence in the face of a Machiavellian world can only bring about the second coming of Machiavelli. As Ann E. Austin puts it in response to Barnett, 'learning in-and-with uncertainty' means students trained to win in 'a situation in which there are no stable descriptions of the world, no concepts that can be seized upon with any assuredness, and no value systems that can claim one's allegiance with any unrivalled authority' (Austin, 2012: 68). This sounds like a description of hell, not a picture of social and economic life. It is, in fact, a description of the solidly linked existential and infrastructural instability of free market systems. A very sensible follow-up comes from Austin though, who cites Jaraslav Pelikan's (1992) idea of the university:

Analyzing some of the challenges facing the world today, Pelikan urged: "Anyone who cares simultaneously about the environment and about the university must address whether the university has the capacity to meet a crisis that is not only ecological and technological, but ultimately educational and moral..." (Austin, 2012: 58).

This basic ethic is largely missing from Barnett and Ainsworth's work. Competition is not inevitable and natural, it is culturally and politically produced. We could replace

Machiavelli with Antonio Negri, as well as his take on Spinoza (Negri, 1981) to explore that idea in more depth. Jaroslav Pelikan called for:

...a re-examination of 'the idea of the university' and explained that 'the university [...] will need to ask basic questions and to address such "first principles" [...] as the interrelationship between knowledge and utility, the problem of the intellectual virtues, and the nature of the university as a community. (Austin, 2012: 58).

Austin's call for a highly abstracted 'respectfulness' is perhaps a little too universal though, when so many worthwhile academic revolutions came from cultures of 'disrespect' - for instance the European struggles emerging from HE institutions in 1968 and the current student struggles emerging from the flashpoint of the UK Millbank Riot in 2010.

But this is a minor point, and her call for imagination is to be encouraged and enabled: as Fredric Jameson pointed out, in our limited capacity to mentally re-construct our world, we can imagine it destroyed completely, but we can't imagine beyond capitalism (2000). Austin also advocates opening out and talking about our inner lives. I agree, noting that Howard Slater (2012) argues for similar processes. But the 'inner' must face outwards, the private must learn to be public again. This is a crucial difference.

Turning to Fortune's (2012) question, 'should HE develop political acumen among students?' the answer is surely 'yes', 'but not like that.' Students should be enabled to identify rhetoric and spin, rather than be encouraged to use it in an anti-social, Thatcherite manner. Ainsworth's proposed Milton Friedman-esque strategies, the Consumer Rights Act and the new Higher Education Bill in Britain, all make this call more urgent: Ontology will only bend within the structures of capitalism, and bend as required. The subjects of capital, Barnett is suggesting, should be able to 'bend better' within a whirlpool of sheer risk.

Following on from earlier comments about Plato's Academy, it might be tempting to suggest that HE is now returning to Sophistry through these changes, but the ontological turn doesn't even prepare the young so well as that. After all, rhetoric is still taught in Britain as part of PPE for the future elites and the ontological turn does not go this far.

Heidegger's own conception of ontological education has been described as 'ontohistorical' in its attempt to loosen the academy's grip on technicity and divisions of labour (Thomson, 2001). If we are to move to ontology, this history needs putting back. While Barnett is understandably proposing the same in the face of contemporary

skills-redundancy, by 're-essentialising the notion of excellence' (ibid) we risk naturalising it, making it transparent, rather than 'disclosing' the technological world, something that Heidegger actually thought himself unable to do (Der Spiegel, 1966). I am not positing Heidegger as a monster, or attacking Barnett, but rather suggesting alternatives, though it should be pointed out that Heidegger himself had given up on human agency as a force after WW2. We have an ethical responsibility to not teach his defeatism to our students, and there are already some very good concrete suggestions of how to 'teach the crisis' (for instance Granter and Tischer, 2014).

Put more simply, Barnett's advocacy provides coping strategies for those about to enter increasingly deregulated, fast capitalism, short term job markets which are producing increasingly deracinated subjects, in terms of gaining any kind of security of labour or income. The descriptions of the circumstances are sadly accurate, but we should aim much higher than 'coping for', which is Heidegger's limit. In his later work, he was sceptical of the possibility of achieving 'coping' (ibid). We have a very grave responsibility to teach learners to deal with the circumstances of precariousness, by understanding them as cultural, economic and historical, rather than (implicitly) as 'natural' or 'inevitable', a state of 'being'. Of course, an ontological turn is not an attempt to sketch precariousness in as a state of nature, but its very language risks that misunderstanding. We need a different kind of language and other philosophical tools, as I will explain in the following sections.

Being and Merit

Another key term is absent from Barnett's paper, 'meritocracy'. Jo Littler (2013) traces the etymology of the term. She explains how the discourse of meritocracy has shifted away from the negative, to celebration. Littler states that the concept:

...has moved from a disparaging reference to an embryonic system of state organisation creating problematic hierarchies through a dubious notion of "merit", to a celebratory term connecting competitive individualism and an essentialised notion of "talent" with a belief in the desirability and possibility of social mobility in a highly unequal society. (Littler, 2013: 68).

In Barnett's paper, this shift, which Littler describes is ghosted, from the 'celebratory' paradigm, to one where 'meritocracy' is accepted and transparent, the assumed ground we stand on.

The original Pelican edition of Michael Young's (disparaging) book *The Rise of the Meritocracy* bears the startling date range of '1870-2033'. It was published in 1958. The subtitle was dropped after the first edition, but this is useful. Young prophetically throws meritocracy right beyond both his and our present day. 'Radical

unknowability' can be described, as can the shifting assumptions around what 'meritocracy' means, in increasingly better ways. 1958, when Young's book was published, was chaos of an entirely different order to 2008, the year of the Great Crash, but the overall effect of Barnett's paper is that we can say so little about the contemporary situation that we must turn to 'being'.

To employ the Heideggerian language, Dasein must now speak against what is knowable and destructive in the contemporary situation. Learning has always been a matter of 'learning for an unknown world', to an extent. For instance, northwestern British industrial towns with apprenticeships focused on skills for a very particular class, for fairly knowable industries, were once a feature of the landscape, yet those industries were to slump, recover, slump and crumble: making what was taught redundant.

What we are facing now is an ontology of precariousness, this is clear, but a sense that this is not desirable should be rescued from the fog of relativism. The political evacuations are all that is clear in this ontological mist, and they are evacuations, rather than omissions. We can count the container ships, talk to the jobless, those living at their parents' homes well into their twenties, thirties and forties, with discontinuous work histories, histories which will be measured and judged by the state, by landlords and agents of 'credit', and we can measure the wealth gap, although we need an ever-larger scale. We can even begin to name names, in local government, in central government, in the World Bank, et cetera (for instance see Toussaint, 2007 and more recently Silver, 2015).

Responses to this are often left in nostalgia or romanticism, which rarely intervenes or halts the unstable flows of capital, but meshes with them (Hatherley, 2009). An essentially aesthetic, lifted-out life now floats over a fundamentally deracinated social (see Hanson, 2014 and Sharzer, 2013). We should promote an epistemological awareness of the issues within 'supercomplexity', which is actually just the permacrisis of a 'free market' world of managed chaos.

We have a duty to warn students about all of this. 'Supercomplexity' contains a life of embodied contradiction. This is how the problem is encountered at an everyday level, as we try to morph our identities in order to respond to what Gillian Rose called 'the broken middle', a complicated mesh of addictions (Rose, 1992).

The links between precarious labour and mental illness are already being discussed (Fisher, 2009 and 2013, Slater, 2012). Deleuze and Guattari's magnum opus of fragments concerns exactly 'Capitalism and Schizophrenia' (1983 and 1988). The

ontological turn for HE as it currently stands risks simply suggesting that the individual subject must bend to the multiple demands of the hyper-accelerated landscape as a ‘player’, rather than against it, as a citizen.

Marx explains that labour-power is not a commodity, because it is human, unstable. It needs to be worked on and ‘weeded’, to reach the point where it can produce surplus (1976 [1867]). Here, this working-upon and weeding is being reframed for the early 21st century. An ontological turn can only create subjects that are duplicitous with their own precariousness, and will further extend its reign. This paper would describe the advocacy of HE ontological theory, in its own Heideggerian terms as being-within-chaos-for-capital. Barnett seems hampered by nervousness, fearing the accusation of a pathologising diagnosis:

To speak of anxiety here is not, it will be understood, to convey a pathological sense of psychological disturbance. Rather, what is meant is a generalized understanding that the world is forever beyond any clear uncontestable understanding. (Barnett, 2012: 70).

But perhaps we should pathologise, not individuals, but the situation. There are things we can say about the rise of mental illness. It is not unknowable. There is a seeming inability to connect things that are connected here: The clear rise in pathological disturbance, in tandem with the clear rise of unstable economies and landscapes, all of which can be epistemologically inscribed, even if those epistemologies are also incomplete and great care needs to be taken with them (see Davies, 2014). The Lyon Declaration (2011) demanded ‘an ecology of social bonds in the context of globalisation’. This should be extended to the new HE philosophy, as indicated in the third section here.

It is also worth pointing out that there are major epistemological divisions, nomothetic, idiographic, etc. Epistemology is just as complex a framework as an ontological one, but it looks out to the world rather than inwards. It deals with surface complexity, not mystical ‘depth’. There is an epistemology of what happens when irrational numbers cause mass housing market collapses and foreclosures across swathes of classed demographics, and the advocacy here seems to be to teach ‘acceptance’, at the same time as claiming those epistemologies are impossible, or implicitly to be excluded from the academy. They are not.

Barnett explains that ‘if the world is radically unknowable then, by extension, “I” am radically unknowable’. But this was being inscribed in Vienna at the turn of the 19th century: The ‘I’ is not unknowable because of supercomplexity, it is not a new situation. The ego was never master in its own house during the modern period. It probably never was (see Gay, 1995). It is the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of the unstable subject

we must turn towards, not the fact itself, nor the endless wait for the disclosure of its 'essence'.

There is a historical production of knowledge as 'radically' incomplete within Higher Education, an epistemology of the fragmented that has now become a form of hegemony, 'poststructuralism', in its reified form. Countering poststructuralism and posthumanism will be key to the argument of the second half of this paper. We need to ask, 'radically incomplete' for who? For salaried media executives, or call centre workers 'becoming' their call centre selves? Class is also elided in the turn to ontology as posited by Barnett. In the same way that speed and slowness are often mapped incorrectly in the 'sketched-in' Bauman-Beck reference, the subject as 'radically incomplete' means the precarious, disturbed subject, as well as those floating a performative frisson across a world they have economical and social capital access to. There is an acute (and epistemological) distinction to be made here, which again, Bauman does make (1998).

The author perhaps needs to be less critical though. There are real points of connection in Barnett's paper. For instance, 'an awareness of the gap between one's actions and one's limited grounds for those actions' should definitely be the starting point. But if we are to engage with ontology at all, the project should be to shift the explicitly Heideggerian 'being-for-uncertainty' into a project which develops 'being-against-uncertainty'.

This paper is advocating a turn outwards, away from ontology, to questions of 'public good' and public life, via political awareness and, if necessary, dissent. But we need to ground this advocacy via the new emerging humanism, particularly as found in the work of Marcus Morgan who actually tackles many of the key concerns Barnett has, but his philosophical framework is quite different and encourages much of the philosophical and ethical pragmatism that is required in the new situation.

Towards a new ethical humanism

At this point a new, practical, post-foundational humanism might be offered as an alternative to the ontological turn, via Marcus Morgan's initial published papers, which start to lay out a kind of neo-humanism, and a new practical ethics, which are 'post-foundational', but pragmatic, a set of doings, to be renegotiated in turn, with each encounter (Morgan, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c). This advocacy hinges on the practical negotiation of ethics and morality in a post-foundational world. In that sense, it mirrors Barnett's concerns about teaching in what Rose (1992) calls the 'broken middle'.

For Morgan, immorality and morality are socially constructed (2014a and 2014b). He describes the expanding inclusivity of the 'postmodern' era, and its inevitable impact on a practical ethics:

With this spread, and because there is no terminal 'truth' to moral questions, inevitably comes a development in the content of morality, so that 'ethics' comes to be seen as a set of morphing agonistic conversations rather than the imperial expansion of one particular fixed set of local assertions ... (2014a, 140).

Again, this shares much of Barnett's view: an uprooted world that requires a new approach to knowledge; but Morgan then moves towards his conclusion, that a workable post-foundational ethics and new humanism is also inevitably fallible:

In a philosophical age defined by a retreat of external sources of certainty, a pragmatic approach to ethics asserts that it is up to human beings themselves to construct their own contingent and contestable ethics. The term "humanism", employed in this pragmatic sense, is therefore doubly suitable for it both describes the species-wide aspiration of the ethics it defends, while also referring back to human beings (rather than God, Reason, or Nature) as its only possible "grounding." (ibid, 141).

So, this post-foundational neo-humanism is potentially 'flawed' right from the start, if it has a 'ground', it is this. But this is not really a 'flaw', it is a strength. It relocates 'all knowledge as contestable' back into praxis, returning it to messy, difficult everyday activity. It removes it from the abstract and puts it back in the world, in short, it enables. This is also very far from the often ethically void relativisms of poststructuralism.

Morgan lays out a convincing argument about re-framing man (sic) with shaky, fallible humanism. Here is an alternative prescription to the ontological turn. Barnett is right to state that we never 'come into a stable relationship with the world', but Morgan provides a practical and ethical response which allows us all, not just some of us, to work within that. Rather than attempting to create a kind of ontological man-for-supercomplexity, we should begin here, precisely in order to avoid the 'abstract speculative' nature of the ontological turn.

If one problem for ethics is the lingering scent of metaphysics in Levinas, as Morgan explains (2014a and 2014b) then 'posthumanism' also needs to be tackled in order to move towards a new, practical humanism.

This raises the issue of what scepticism of posthumanism, and, by extension, poststructuralism, has to do with Barnett and the ontological turn? Precisely that

Derrida and others moved us away from both humanism and structuralism via an earlier kind of ontological turn, which involved Heidegger and Husserl (see Norris, 1985, 110-122). Again, Morgan returns this debate to a more practical level. In a review of Rosi Braidotti's book on *The Posthuman*, he describes:

...her frank acknowledgement that "it is one thing to loudly announce an anti-humanist stance, quite another to act accordingly with even a modicum of consistency." (2014c, 204).

In this sense, Morgan suggests that '...the theoretical project she is proposing is condemned to the futile efforts of a shadow attempting to flee its object.' More straightforwardly though, Morgan outlines how Braidotti reclaims 1960s and 1970s activist movements as 'rallying under the banner of "radical antihumanism."' (ibid). Morgan counters this by convincingly accounting for the theorists of those movements as 'characterised by a profound, vocal, and self-conscious humanism.' (ibid). He goes on to explain that although crude 'linear thinking' may be 'inadequate for the 'posthuman predicament', at this point in history we still need praxis, not abstraction.

Morgan says similar things about humanism and its supposed 'overcoming' of its own circumstances, that is often fired upon by posthumanists. Morgan asks 'why humanism itself must necessarily continue to be cast in its erstwhile exclusionary terms', why is 'abstract liberal individualism the only available option for recuperative humanists?' He goes on to state that Braidotti's 'main argument ultimately depends upon the presentation of humanism as a fossil', 'not only an unfair presentation but an ahistorical one too.' (Morgan, 2014c, 204). So, the new humanism is not a settled paradigm either, it is a debate for later.

We too can ask, in the same spirit, why must HE theory be grounded in Heideggerian ontology? We might rescue Jameson's call to 'always historicise' (in Hardt, 2000) by stating that poststructuralism and postmodernity not only 'made more sense', but were historically produced by the pre-2008 crash era and the longer curve of monetarist consumer capitalism, emerging fully in and around the early 1980s. Therefore it is possible to relocate these intellectual traditions - and they are now 'traditional' - in a longer history of western capitalism and the cultures that sit within it. Interestingly, the turn to ontology in HE theory comes after the bursting of this western credit bubble. It may have made more sense before that bursting, but after it a turn to being becomes strongly questionable.

A new humanism is not a completely new idea either. For instance, Les Back talks about it in *Art of Listening* (2007). Morgan wishes to move us towards a constructed, pragmatic, humanist ethics, particularly in the face of our contemporary crises, those

sketched in under the shorthand name of ‘precarité’. With this in mind, Morgan moves us back, in order to start his inquiry, to the Socratic practice of asking ‘how should one live at this point in history?’ (Morgan, 2014a: 130).

Again, this begins to sketch in the need for a philosophy of public questions and public good, but the way Morgan refigures this request is via a new humanism and empirical practices and away from a ‘so-called “postmodern” world’, with its traditional home within the conventionally abstract, deductive, and legalistic disciplines of philosophy and theology towards more empirical and inductive disciplines such as sociology.’ (ibid: 131).

Here, essentially, are all the ‘turns’ we need ask for, on behalf of our students: away from ontology; towards epistemology, and into an enabling political *agon*. As well as providing some very sensible proposals for the structures of knowledge, Morgan also gives a practical suggested route through post-foundational ethics.

Morgan cites Bauman on the ‘personal choice’ of ethics in an age of uncertainty, an existential struggle of what is right and wrong (ibid). He works through the erosion of structures of values and norms, which throw us back on our ethical resources on a pragmatic, day-to-day plane much more (ibid). This is not naïve liberal freedom, but a tortuous struggle. Again, this mirrors earlier concerns in this paper, essentially that it is all very well for HE staff to float lofty philosophical rafts out, but they must be mindful of who they are being constructed for. But Morgan's philosophy is also immediately translatable into HE teaching. It is not abstracted. It has a historical ground, an object. Simultaneously, by explicitly including struggle into ‘choice’, Morgan properly politicises the subject. Morgan moves us from an acceptance that ethics can no longer be grounded in ‘god’ or other universals, to a ‘base’ in ‘contestable human values and concerns.’ (ibid: 132).

Ethics, at this point in history, is a highly loaded, difficult, often impossible set of choices. Again, this tallies with Barnett’s diagnosis. But it demands, crucially, a new humanism that is framed *negatively*, which means both critically and transformatively, after Adorno (1966).

Morgan suggests that we should not define humanity in this era via its virtues, but its horrors, citing Todorov, who concludes that ‘extreme evil is common, ordinary evil is ubiquitous.’ (2014a: 132). ‘Supercomplexity’ is not a blank void we need to negotiate, an ‘empty space’. The sheer scale of inhumanity in our era is the first challenge for Morgan, but the second challenge is to ask for ‘new forms of ethics in a post-absolutist age characterized by a questioning of universals’. (ibid).

He then makes an argument that runs through much recent European philosophy, that if there is no god after the holocausts, then we have to re-frame man (sic) with fallible humanism, there is no choice. Morgan tracks Levinas' shift from ontology to ethics, that the Other makes us and we make the Other (Hand, 1998). Even if we go with an ontological basis for HE practice, this must be upfronted within that. As it stands, this paper follows Morgan, who then distances himself from the way in which both Levinas - and Bauman, who was to follow him - place their ontological ethical interaction as mystical and beyond reason. Morgan is 'moving beyond a static essentialism of the human.' (2014, 135).

Morgan warns that all strategies of practical humanist ethics are 'open to failure', but that they have to replace the 'revealed' ethical revelations of metaphysical doctrines which still incubate the privileges of the Heideggerian philosopher of 'depth' (ibid). Pelikan's advocacy for a university of community and negotiated ethics, discussed earlier, is also well-underpinned by Morgan's philosophy.

The whole point of this paper, then, is to make clear that this new post-foundational humanism is a new potential underpinning for HE pedagogy, and an alternative to the current ontological turn.

Conclusion

We can thus conclude that centre right changes to HE structures mean that international competition is increasing, largely unchallenged, at all levels; that an ontological turn to 'being' as a response to that is not only philosophically weak, but politically troubling, and that there are alternative philosophical and political groundings available for HE pedagogy, as outlined above.

Barnett's diagnosis is correct; his understanding of the educational challenges ahead acute; but there are problems rooted in his core philosophy. The same thing can be said about Ainsworth's policy suggestions, again all the way up to the point where he stops diagnosing and begins prescribing. This paper has sketched out the philosophical concerns and then delineated - as riskily as Barnett's initial work - an alternative set of emerging philosophical and ethical frameworks as a substitute for those that it critiques.

The new HE bill in the UK is opening up the market further, and it is a market, to new players. The future scene, although also not completely unknowable, is still unclear, but what is very plain is the need for active negation in the face of the crisis.

Although I include my own neo-humanist prescription here – so many critical papers end where the criticism runs out - the point is to inaugurate a new debate about Higher Education in crisis via a critique of Heideggerian ontology in 1) HE pedagogical philosophy and 2) HE policy. The advocacy here could equally result in a new alignment of HE philosophy with a neo-realist or critical realist position, it could, in fact, align with object oriented ontology, following on from Callon and Latour et al (see Bogost, 2012). But that detail, I hope, will come through future debate.

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