

[Opdracht: Vision on Care and Science: what does it mean to care for science; why does the academic community require a vision for caring; how can care be put into practice]

To what extent is the concept of care a social intervention in knowledge formation?

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twitter

Slide 1 My twitter one-liner was a question: "To what extent is the concept of care a social intervention in knowledge formation?" In my view both the concept and the practice of care leads to other / new knowledge – but how are content and process entangled? And behind that, a more fundamental question: what is the purpose of knowledge formation and knowledge production, why do universities exist. In this respect I am inspired by the statement in the Scholars at Risk programme, quoted by the Rector in Leuven, about universities serving individual and social functions, as engines of knowledge production, and wellsprings to other professions that are foundational to civil society.¹

I did not hesitate before accepting the invitation for this evening, because 'caring for science' in the sense of caring about how the university system organizes knowledge production, with whom, and under what conditions and preconditions, is among the core concerns of me as a dean of a faculty, the faculty of humanities. In that capacity I am responsible for a good academic climate, in a context of cross-faculty governance within the university, and the disciplinary interuniversity exchanges among the humanities deans in the Netherlands. When I was appointed as the new dean, I announced in *ad valvas* that human resources management would have my full attention, and strengthening diversity among staff and students a priority as from day one. I have the impression that my being outspoken in this respect, had the effect that people share their experiences and worries. My insight into many aspects of care, for science, for the academic community, grew because of me being outspoken. However, more important: the fact that I had declared this also implied that I had to act *indeed*; there is no option to back off, to evade difficult choices, to postpone decisions, hide behind nice policy intentions; because I can be held accountable which is a core value

¹ (ontleend aan Guno's reactivie); In that respect I was also inspired by the quote on universities in the Scholars at Risk programme in the Lecture of the rector in Leuven): "This is because universities serve both crucial individual and social functions. They are engines of knowledge production, discovery, innovation, skills development, cultural preservation, and national progress. They model democratic discourse and international cooperation, as well as the search for self-realization and moral truth. And they are wellsprings for other professions that are foundational to well-functioning civil society, including law, journalism, and human rights advocacy" (Scholars at Risk) [4].

of the VU. This is not a revolution from above, however, my first conclusion for discussion is: **to be outspoken, in leadership positions, in issues of care, is important in the current dynamics of change with respect to our care for science and scientists.**

So I easily agreed to speak here. However, then came the request by the organizers for a quote for twitter. Which made me think about the implications of being outspoken on twitter. First I drafted a one-liner with a warning to be careful when discussions about the institution, the scientific discipline, the personal and the political get entangled. But then I realized that this in itself was a caution not to use social media, since it was an abstract statement which requires a lot of explanation and discussion which would not work in social media. So my statement changed towards the open question with which I started: “To what extent is the concept of care a social intervention in knowledge formation?” It ends with a question mark. Question marks on twitter use to be rhetorical, asking for the obvious, or cynical and provocative. They can’t be retweeted, I just hoped that mine would trigger attention for the debate of this evening.

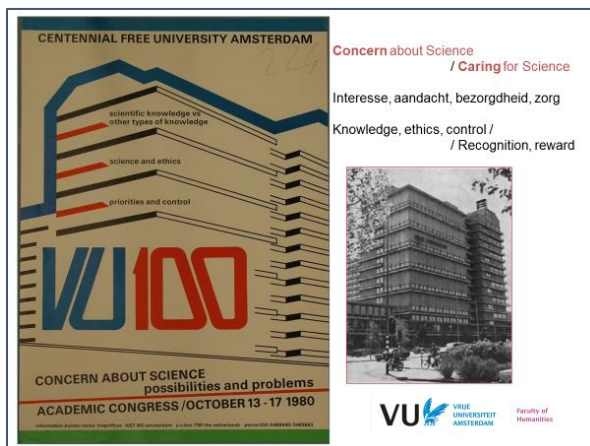
Power point

slide 2, But then came the next request by the organizers: could you please send your power point file two days in advance. As with twitter, I had not thought about that either. A power point presentation inevitably pins you down, instead of inviting for an open attitude towards the discussion going to happen. However, I decided to obey and to briefly explore the four elements of my initial statement that I deemed *not* fit for twitter and which reads: “be careful when discussions about the institution, the scientific discipline, the personal and the political get entangled.” And with careful I don’t mean ‘take care’, *pas op, kijk uit*, but I mean – and this is directed at the leaders of institutions as well as at the academic community at large: be careful - look at it with concern, in terms of responsibility, accountability and care. I hope that this somehow fits in with what the others have put to the table.



1980: Epistemic depillarization

Let me unpack the four elements in my statement: the institution, the discipline, the personal, the political. First briefly the institution: my point of reference is the Vrije Universiteit and as a historian, I would like to provide some historical context of the Vrije Universiteit as an epistemic community in itself. **Slide 3** In 1980 the VU celebrated its centennial with among others this congress: *Concern about science. Possibilities and problems*. “Concern” is another word, but maybe a synonym of “Care”. If my intuition is right (I am not a native speaker of course) then being concerned is about interests, attention, being cautious, and careful. These are dynamic interactional terms with a positive and negative touch. My hypothesis is that “Concern about Science”, in 1980 was not about the scientists, about their recognition and rewarding as we discuss today, but about the challenges of knowledge production. However the problems announced at the poster can easily be transferred to today, with their reference to what counts as knowledge, about ethics, about control and regulation, in the context of science. When these issues were a concern of the time, they must, at the time, also have been the concerns of the *staff* about staffing policies and their *own* work and mutual relations.



That staff, in many respects, had been part of an epistemic community tightly connected to the very history of the institution itself. **Slide 4** I just give one example here, of a 1971 handbook to familiarize students- with academic education and research. Added to the book and now in the special collections of the library, are these drawings on “University and Library”, which place the VU Main Building with its library in an Anton Pieck-like world of abundant nature and chaotic city life, in which, only implicitly present, we, humans, grapple with words, tools and scientific instruments, but basically have to understand the mythical (or religious) wisdom that “Meaning is the being of all that has been created.”² I would suggest that these drawings with this quote are a prime expression of

² Jakop Slegt. Weesp 1971. *University and Library* A.D.1971. Appendix to J.Stellingwerff, *Inleiding tot de Universiteit*, 1971. Quote of De zin is het zijn van alle creatuurlijk zijnde; translated as “Meaning is the being of all that has been created.” in: Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, vol I, p. 4, 1969

the VU-academic community half a century ago, understood – in today’s words – as an epistemic *pillar* with deeply religious roots. The “Concern about Science” at the 1980 centennial congress then was about the depillarization of the time that followed major developments in society at large. A depillarization with fundamental scientific disciplinary disputes (just think about the emerging VU trans gender care), that, of course, deeply resonated in recruitment policies, both of staff and students, as well as in the governance structure of the Vrije Universiteit.

Epistemic pillar?

"De zin is het zijn van alle creatuurlijk zijnde" (Dooyeweerd, 1935)

"Meaning is the being of all that has been created."²

Jakob Slegel. Weesp 1971. Universitend Library A.D.1971. Appendix to J.Stellingwerff *opleiding tot de Universiteit*.1971.

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² Translated in: Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* II, p. 4, 1965

So far about the institution and academic discourse. Then the third element: the personal. **Slide 5** One iconic expression of the way this epistemic battle affected personal choices, is the famous “Either/or declaration”, according to which, by way of compromise, staff had to declare that *either* they agreed with the charter of the VU, according to which all labour was directed in obedience to the Gospel of Jesus Christ toward the service of God and his world; *or* they declared that they knew this and would contribute in the spirit of these objectives.”³

Epistemic depillarization: from within?

'Dan Wel (Either/Or) Verklaring' (1970s):
 "... Declares that he/she agrees with the charter objectives of the VU (...) to direct all its labour in obedience to the gospel of Jesus Christ toward the service of God and His world

or

that he/she is familiar with the charter objectives of the VU and declares to contribute as good as possible to the governance of the university, in the spirit of these objectives"³

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³ Thanks to University Historian Ab Flipse for sending me the image of this archival piece

And finally, since the personal is political, as the women's movement convincingly argued, **Slide 6** the fourth element, the political, was omnipresent as well in those transformation times.



Care has a history too

I will not discuss it further here. What matters for our discussion today is that the concept of care, of caring for science, has a history too. It is not for the first time that the academic community is shaken up in ways that deal with the institution, with knowledge production, the personal and the political, all entangled. To understand current institutional responses implies that we not focus on just one aspect, disciplinary debates or human resources policies, but that we grapple with our institutional and scientific histories as well. The 1970s-80s were dedicated transformation times, in terms of how politics entered the institution, how student and staff population changed, and how scientific and technological break throughs contributed to epistemic changes and new concerns about types of knowledge, ethics and agency. Responses to today's debates about recognition and rewarding – that are entangled with discussions about who make up the academic community, what are its core values – these have these histories as well. The institution that got used to the past achievements, with a new balance and implicit consensus about a developing academic scope, student population, gender policies, international scope, this institution now needs to actively engage with *our* time – with its fundamental challenges in terms of methodological nationalism, institutional racism, and contested histories of science. Think of the 1971 drawings and imagine how a single drawing of today's introduction to the university in a handbook for students would look like. **Slide 7** It would still be about meaning making, but probably nature would no longer be God given, books would no longer be the carriers of words handed down to man, industry would not just be meaning making, people would no longer be absent from the image. On the contrary, for good and bad, they probably

would be centre stage, as foreshadowed in this series of four etches by Rolf Weijburg, commissioned by the VU in 2008.⁴



Speaking up

Back then to my twitter question about the concept of care and knowledge formation. We cannot separate institution, science, personnel and politics, rather we need to understand how they interact in each specific case. Over the last months I have experienced how difficult it is to address the implicit consensus about the 1980s achievements and reflect on these in new terms of inclusion and exclusion. It is my responsibility as a Dean to be transparent, facilitate developments and enhance a caring atmosphere. Many times I discover that when for instance I try to address an issue in support of a young scholar who does not feel free because of what is perceived as unfamiliarity with or epistemic bias towards certain debates, the person with whom I discuss this, answers me as if self-evidently we already agree – as if we have the same worries about wokeness, about importing discussions from the States to our academy, about the hype of diversity officers, or as if we both think that gender neutral toilets are an exaggeration indeed etc. Being drawn into such dominant views is, at times, intimidating. I chose my battles, with respect to discussions; and I often realize that the person responds because to them the topic is new, and repeating a consensus is safe, being open

⁴ The four etches are published by that artist on his personal website. Print run is limited to 4 x 25 prints. [Rolf Weijburg maakt regelmatig werk in opdracht. De opdrachten die hij de afgelopen jaren aanvaardde, variëren in techniek van etsen in oplage tot aquarellen, pastels en tekeningen. In kleine en heel grote formaten. Als illustraties en landkaarten, en als autonome kunstwerken. De opdrachtgevers waren daarbij even uiteenlopend als de opdrachten. De oplages van de in opdracht vervaardigde etsen -maar ook veel ander werk - worden in nauwe samenwerking gedrukt met of door etsdrukker Eric Levert in Amsterdam. Een selectie van bijzondere opdrachten en gelegenheidssetsen: <https://www.weijburg.nl/1c-bottom.html>]

to critique feeling unsafe. For me, however, care – being careful – implies being aware of the unsafety that this consensus seeking creates for those who disagree, and who, for many reasons, simply need to speak up.

<https://www.kuleuven.be/communicatie/congresbureau/corporate-evenementen/opening-academiejaar/speeches/speech-van-rector-luc-sels>

prestige bias: <https://philpapers.org/archive/DECPBA.pdf>

relevant links for E&W here:

<https://www.scienceguide.nl/2021/07/nieuwe-erkennen-en-waarderen-schaadt-nederlandse-wetenschap/>

<https://www.scienceguide.nl/2021/07/we-moeten-af-van-telzucht-in-de-wetenschap/>

<https://www.scienceguide.nl/2021/09/bij-erkennen-en-waarderen-moet-er-niet-gepolderd-worden/>

<https://www.utoday.nl/news/70181/we-willen-dezelfde-kant-op-op-een-objectieve-manier>

Programme:

"Let's stop talking about Science and start focusing more on Academia. Academia is the institution, science is what we do. To assure that we care and are cared for by Science we need to focus on the institution." -Lorraine Nencel

"A caring university has a minimal requirement: good jobs for all its people, from academics to cleaners" -Paola Gori-Giorgi

"Caring for science also means caring for scientists!" -Jeannette Pols

"Science selected on excellence only gives the highest reward to society and should therefore be cherished." -Raymond Poot

"Caring for science means to me that we create an academic system that is safe, inspiring and allows people to do great things." -Hanneke Hulst

"To what extent is the concept of care a social intervention in knowledge formation?" -Susan Legêne