

Article

Transcending the Technocratic Mentality through the Humanities

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Abstract: Catholic education has a long tradition of engagement with the liberal arts and especially the humanities. The place of the humanities today in the curriculum is under threat for several reasons, one being the predominance of the technocratic mentality. This paper revisits (in three steps) the contested issue of the role of the humanities in education. First, I review arguments about the role of the humanities within education. Second, some of the defects of the technocratic mentality are pointed out. Third, a Christian lens for viewing the humanities is deployed. Here I propose that the humanities play a valuable role in nurturing the imagination, thereby contributing both to a capacity to transcend the technocratic outlook and to the development of the holistic and humanising education that is central to a Catholic worldview.

Keywords: technocratic mentality; the humanities; Romano Guardini; Pope Francis; Christian imagination; the cardinal virtues



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1. Introduction

The kind of education that takes place anywhere is a response to the pressures and demands of a particular context, and it draws upon the resources available in that context. That education is also a response to the priorities, purposes and predominant values of the people and it seeks to develop the qualities, skills and knowledge they believe they need to address these desirable qualities in order to cope with and to flourish in their context. Hunter-gatherers need knowledge of their landscape, of predators and their habitat. Farmers need knowledge of the land, especially about the soil, the weather, the seasons and how to make best use of animals. Warriors need military prowess, physical strength and courage. Craftsmen need to be aware of how to use and shape artefacts in wood, leather, glass or stone. Religious figures need to know the lore of their people, the myths and rituals of their tradition, and they are expected to model moral character and a spiritual life. Merchants need to know the world of business, and they depend on prudence, calculation, thrift and economic enterprise in their buying and selling. Medics and lawyers, scribes and courtiers, administrators and bureaucrats—all depend on qualities, skills and knowledge pertinent to their roles. Citizens are expected to abide by the law, to be ethical and to subordinate their personal preferences to the common good. Factory workers are expected to be docile, obedient and reliable, able to carry out instructions and to cope with routine and boredom. Scholars need a disciplined mind, literacy and facility in the ways of learning. Those destined for leadership are expected to develop independence, initiative and ambition, and, in some cases, today as in the past, high-level skill in persuasion. In an information and technocratic society, a facility in deploying sophisticated communications media is a prerequisite. Apart from all these, other educational priorities have been seen; for example, a romantic-naturalist emphasis on the unfolding from within of human nature, unfettered by external prescription, where self-development and individuality are prized highly. More recently, education has been used to promote both identity formation and social harmony amidst pluralism.

This paper proposes that an important role for teaching the humanities today lies in their capacity to provide a counterweight to the prevailing power of the technocratic mentality. In part one, ‘Upholding the Humanities’, I explore the shifts in emphasis evident over time in various attempts that have been made to explain the nature of and to supply a rationale for teaching the humanities. In part two, ‘The Technocratic Mentality’, I describe a cluster of features that comprise the technocratic mentality and, drawing on critiques offered by the Italian-born German priest and philosopher Romano Guardini (1885–1968) and Pope Francis, I indicate some of their dehumanising effects, illustrating these in managerialism, one expression of the technocratic mentality. Part three, ‘A Christian Imagination’, begins by proposing that the criterion of conformity to Christ as the goal of human development, as seen by Christians, leads them to both value and yet also to relativise the role of education, and, by implication, the humanities too, before going on to give special emphasis to the role of the humanities in nurturing imagination, in supporting the development of the Cardinal Virtues and, more broadly, in serving to counter the defects of the technocratic mentality.

2. Upholding the Humanities

The line distinguishing liberal arts from the humanities has frequently been blurred and often these terms have been treated as interchangeable. Broadly speaking, liberal arts have a wider remit than the humanities, often including the sciences, music and the creative arts (such as dance, drama and the history of art). Theology too might be considered a necessary component of the liberal arts for Christians, as it probes the meaning and implications of divine revelation, shows us how to open ourselves to God’s grace and indicates pathways to becoming Christ-like. The liberal arts have traditionally been considered to be those subjects which are fitting for a free person, one who enjoys a degree of leisure, who can be expected to exercise a position of responsibility in society. They were for the free-born person, they were not intended to train one for a specific career, and they were not serving utilitarian purposes. Furthermore, they were called liberal because they were thought to offer liberation—from the inner tendencies that imprison people, such as compulsions, vices and falsehoods. The freedom promised by the liberal arts is the capacity to live according to virtue and guided by the truth. It is not intended to serve other ends. Thus, ‘the purpose of the liberal arts is not to achieve any monetary end, to solve a particular social problem, or to produce a particular material good’ (Macias 2020, p. 93).

The focus here is on the humanities, where the main emphasis has been on reading, writing, speaking and interpretation; and the principal qualities they sought to promote were virtue, prudence and eloquence, culminating in practical wisdom. These might be categorised as transferable skills and qualities, along the lines of the trivium which formed the foundation of education for centuries. Traditionally, the trivium—grammar, logic and rhetoric, or the rules of language, rational argumentation and moral persuasion—was considered the basis on which rested the quadrivium—arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy. Together these seven forms of study comprised the liberal arts (Sayers 1947; McLuhan 2006). The humanities have always constituted an integral component in the liberal arts, even before they evolved into their current disciplinary formation.

To make our way in the world, we need *both* the short-term, practical precision and pragmatism made possible by technocratic thinking *and* the kinds of questioning afforded by the liberal arts more generally and by the humanities in particular. These questions include: what picture of human nature and its capacities informs our actions? To what ends are our energies directed? How did we get to here? Are there other ways of being and acting we can conceive of and orient ourselves towards? Who benefits from our present arrangements? What gives us joy? How do we cope with our vulnerabilities, perplexities, and the challenges life throws at us? What do we have in common with each other, despite our differences? How can we learn from and be enriched by our differences? Are we addressing our deepest needs and those of our fellow human beings? How do we hear each other’s stories and the truth hidden therein? What is wisdom and how

does differ from worldly success? How do we relate to the transcendent? From where can we draw inspiration as we walk life's journey? These are questions wrestled with in the humanities and they transcend the narrower, though also necessary, outlook of the technocratic mentality. They are questions that help the liberal arts to remain rooted in a sound appreciation of human nature and needs.

What is salient for the teaching of the humanities is influenced by those features of human beings that are privileged in any particular period and culture. These might be rationality, autonomy, creativity, empathy, compassion, economic efficiency, political loyalty or spiritual development. The humanities are concerned with meaning and motivation, with the moral, aesthetic and spiritual, as well as intellectual dimensions of being human. Through them, students learn how to question themselves, their assumptions, their values and their interpretations. They explore the experience, emotions and values of humanity and the wisdom derived from these. As Small (2013, p. 24) points out, 'The humanities concern themselves with human culture, not in the first instance with animal behaviour, or the physical world, or financial systems, or laws, or mathematical models, or the operations of businesses (though many of these things may come within their remit as they are represented in culture).'

Adler (2020) argues for the intellectual, aesthetic and moral value of studying profound works of art, philosophy, literature and religion. Through these texts, students are to be encouraged to reflect on major questions of life. He stresses the importance of content over method and skills and he laments the reduced emphasis on close engagement with what he calls cultural masterworks (p. 207). Adler notes (p. 48) that the Renaissance humanists (who stand behind modern humanities teachers) believed they should get their students to attend closely to a range of particular texts, ones which modelled important qualities and which raised key features of human life. In their case, they drew on, for example, Cicero, Vergil, Livy, Sallust, Tacitus, Homer and Lactantius; for them the humanities were to be found in the study of grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history and moral philosophy. Adler sees a connection between the study of the subject matter of the humanities and the qualities that make us humane (p. 37). For him there is no reason to envisage any conflict between aiming for both humanitarianism and humanism—'the drive to improve the material conditions of the world *and* to improve oneself' (p. 217). As he observes, 'Without the former, we potentially encourage in the young an anchorite disconnect from society; without the latter, we leave the world in the hands of those who lack an ethical centre' (p. 217).

Thus, at the heart of humanities teaching there is a balance to be struck between, on the one hand, a concern for intellectual content and rigour, and, on the other, a desire to promote moral development. Teachers generally find it easier to convey content and to impart skills than to form character or to help students to arrive at wisdom. The humanistic approach to its object of study is more intuitive and holistic than is the case with the natural and social sciences and the relative emphasis given to subjectivity (as compared with objectivity) is more marked (though these differences should not be pressed too far). The humanities also lack the sense of linear progress in knowledge enjoyed by the sciences. On the whole, the humanities offer a different way of knowing from that afforded by the natural or social sciences. For example, literature opens up access to the lives of other people, whose contexts, dilemmas and perceptions are both different from and similar to our own, thereby fostering empathy, deepening our sympathies, challenging our assumptions, allowing us to dwell, albeit temporarily, in another person's experience, providing entertainment, solace, insight and challenge.

If, in the past, the humanities curriculum focussed very strongly on landmark texts, there has been a tendency in classrooms in recent years to talk more about issues thought to be of interest to readers today than the thought-world of the text itself. While attending, for example, to issues of gender, race, identity, colonialism and social inequality, as illustrated in the text, might give an impression of heightening the relevance (for our culture) of the text in question, this can also be a way of avoiding being sufficiently open to the otherness to be encountered in the world of that text. Such an approach runs the risk of imposing an

agenda (and current concerns) on the thoughts of the writer; it can prevent us from entering into their stories on their terms—and thereby allowing our assumptions to be called into question and our imagination to be fed and fired. Our reading should not only be driven by concerns for relevance today (which can be narcissistic) but also by an openness to encounter and transformation. By suspending our own preoccupations and entering into the situation and perspectives of those from contexts (and times) very different from our own, we may detect, through their promptings, aspects of reality and human experience that up to now we had failed to notice or appreciate. On this point Nussbaum (1997, p. 32) claims that ‘There is no more effective way to wake pupils up than to confront them with difference in an area where they had previously thought their own ways neutral, necessary, and natural.’ As an example of this, she shares the following observation: ‘One cultural group thinks that corpses must be buried; another, that they must be burnt; another, that they must be left in the air to be plucked clean by the birds. Each is shocked by the practices of the other, and each, in the process, starts to realize that its habitual ways may not be the ways designed by nature for all times and persons’ (p. 53).

Nussbaum is an advocate for the humanities, and especially the teaching of literature, as vitally important as an ingredient in a curriculum that promotes the qualities necessary for citizenship. Indeed, the sub-title of a later book of hers is ‘Why Democracy Needs the Humanities’ (Nussbaum 2010). She wants citizens who can think for themselves, criticise tradition, and understand the significance of another person’s sufferings and achievements. They must know ‘what it is like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person’s story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have’ (p. 96). Learning the art of interpretation and the cultivation of sympathy and the trained ability to see the world through the eyes of another person are central here.

This role of the humanities in developing in students the qualities required in a democracy is echoed by Francis Mulhern, who selects some out of the many intellectual practices pursued by the humanities—trained deliberation, criticism, advocacy, evaluation, mediation of ideas with respect to norms of representation—and he identifies them as having special importance for the good political functioning of a democracy (Mulhern, cited in Small 2013, pp. 143–44). Of course, it is not only the humanities which contribute to this situation; but they clearly have a part to play.

It should be noted here that Mulhern, along with Nussbaum and other defenders of the humanities, attribute much weight to their contribution to the development of critical thinking in students. However, this aspect of their role, important though it is, should not be stressed at the expense of other features of humanities teaching. Helen Small reminds us that the role of the humanities goes beyond developing critical skills: ‘The work of the humanities is frequently descriptive, or appreciative, or imaginative, or provocative, or speculative, more than it is critical’ (Small 2013, p. 26). Critique of and resistance to the material presented in the curriculum should be balanced by receptivity and appreciation, even, on occasion, reverence for it, if they are not to disable students from an in-depth engagement with the material, undermine their openness and humility, and thereby become corrosive of the student’s character.

Roche (2010) gives a different emphasis in his rationale for the humanities. He expects classes in the humanities to ask the big questions that give meaning to life, and that prompt a sense of vocation and connection to a higher purpose. However, despite this difference of emphasis, Nussbaum would agree with the qualities that Roche looks for from the humanities: attentiveness, sensitivity, compassion, sympathy, playfulness, creativity and evaluation. Like her, he wants his students to enter into the experience of others, to question themselves as well as the material being studied.

A final point should be made before I end this section. There is something ineluctably *particular* about learning in the humanities. Whereas both the natural and the social sciences focus on patterns of behaviour and interaction in events and activities (physical and social) that have a law-like quality, what comes into view in the humanities can rarely be so easily

categorised or fit into some system or type or lead to some generalisable knowledge claim. This particularity applies in two respects: first, the particularity of the object under study (the text, the person, the event or experience)—what is different, perhaps even unique, here as compared with other possible examples that might be selected; second, the particularity of the response we seek to elicit from the student who encounters this particular object. Both what is studied in the humanities and the one who does the learning elude any exhaustive, comprehensive description, classification or evaluation. There is always more that could be said about them.

3. The Technocratic Mentality

Whereas once the humanities had a privileged and secure place in the curriculum of schools and universities, as propaedeutic pathways towards the elite subjects of law, medicine and theology, they are increasingly being squeezed by the growing pressure exerted by science, technology, engineering and mathematics. As Jerome Kagan notes,

Natural scientists have become members of the entrenched establishment. This new arrangement leaves writers, poets, philosophers, historians, and social scientists as the loyal opposition against a materialistic determinism that exaggerates the influence of genes and neurochemistry on human behaviour and emotion, while minimizing the influence of culture, values, and the historical moment on the meanings of words, sources of uncertainty, and each person's attempt to render their life coherent (Kagan 2009, p. 266).

It must be acknowledged that modern techniques and technology have brought many benefits to humankind. Drains, dentists, dishwashers and other devices have hugely improved our health, reduced the pain we have to undergo and saved us from much wearisome labour. Such fruits from technology have helped humanity in dealing effectively with many diseases. Technological advances in transport and telecommunications have opened up access to vast amounts of information and contributed to the overcoming of many barriers of distance stemming from geography, income, class, disability, ethnicity, education and worldview. Nevertheless, along with these benefits provided by many technological advances, a range of attitudes and values—not themselves necessary accompaniments of the use of such technology—have become widespread. It is these I have in mind when I refer to the technocratic mentality.

A technocracy is a society characterized by heavy reliance (for example, in government, in the economy, and in education) on an elite of technical experts. Technocratic thinking influences, for example, the whole gamut of government policy, medical research and treatments, financial transactions, target marketing strategies, and evaluations and recommendations of scholarly outputs.

At the heart of a technocratic mindset is a belief in value-neutral, instrumental rationality. For example, the standards and accountability regime (backed up by funding arrangements) experienced by many schools is perceived by those who impose it as being values-neutral, intended to help all students to gain access to a quality education. Yet, 'the standards have been the site of significant battles among political interest groups' (Hayden and Harman 2021, p. 81). Inevitably, educational institutions find themselves serving capitalist and economic agendas which often exert a dominant influence, to the neglect of democratic, aesthetic, scientific, humanistic and spiritual considerations. When the technocratic outlook lays down standardized goals to be pursued, specifying a whole range of objectives and targets to be achieved and establishing a surveillance system to ensure compliance, the role of teachers is reduced to delivering instruction and assessing student progress against predetermined outcomes. This makes it much more difficult for them to exercise judgement, imagination and adaptability in their response to individual student needs. At the same time, because of the heavy reliance on quantitative testing, students are introduced to a narrow concept of thinking as a means-ends instrument, deployed to help them acquire transferable skills that can be applied in the marketplace.

By comparison, the kinds of sensibilities fostered by the humanities—literary, aesthetic, moral and spiritual, together with historical perspective—seem much less amenable to functional analysis and quantitative measurement. Hayden and Harman describe one unfortunate result of an unbalanced stress on technocratic thinking in education as being ‘desublimation’: ‘the value of an experience is destroyed by deconstructing the connective tissues that constitute the experience as a whole. Those connective tissues are the unmeasurable, the undefinable, the ineffable, and individually meaningful connections and relevancies made by each individual learner’ (Hayden and Harman 2021, p. 93). These subjective connective tissues are very much what the humanities help students to find for themselves.

When I refer to the technocratic mentality I have in mind a pattern of assumptions, a way of thinking and an ethos that develops if such assumptions and thinking move from playing a subordinate role—applied in limited circumstances, and used in service of and in the light of other, more fundamental principles—to exerting an excessive (and thus deleterious) and unbalanced influence in society, education and culture because it is not complemented and enriched by the kind of education provided by the humanities. I make it clear first, that technocratic thinking has a legitimate contribution to make, second, that the connections between such thinking and the pathologies described are contingent, rather than necessary, and third, that, along with other liberal arts, the humanities offer resources and promote capacities in students that constitute an important counterweight to the technocratic mentality.

The cluster of features and assumptions that contribute to the technocratic mentality are only loosely associated; not all of them are logically entailed by other assumptions in the thinking often adopted by some technocrats. Rather than operating as a precise mechanism, they gradually seep into the thinking of a wider public. Partly this is due to the lack of formation and education in alternative, humanistic types of thinking—which is provided by the liberal arts more generally and by the humanities in particular. However, the way such alternative educational thinking operates is not by any direct refutation of technocratic thinking, point by point; rather it enlarges the sensibilities (for example by developing the imagination, the virtues and historical perspective), so that technocratic thinking is ‘relocated’, contextualised and subordinated to the fundamental principles underpinning Catholic education.

Technocrats tend to believe that all problems can be solved by their expertise, and they fail to recognise the role that noninstrumental, value-based considerations play in achieving good outcomes. The technocratic mentality is sometimes assumed to be an embodiment of neo-liberalism, but although the technocratic mentality *is* often in service of neo-liberalism, in reality other ideologies and even faith traditions can find themselves employing a technocratic outlook that is insufficiently grounded in and guided by the fundamental principles of that worldview. As a result, despite their espoused commitment to these fundamental principles, they too can become internally incoherent and dysfunctional.

Technocrats tend to be research-informed: they often draw heavily in their decision-making or in their advocacy of policies on data collection and statistical modelling. Their thinking relies on a sound grasp of mathematics, the available scientific knowledge and logic. Humanities scholars sometimes underestimate the need for mathematical literacy. Yet, as Underwood (2018) has pointed out, ‘To prepare students for a world where information is filtered by computers, we will need a stronger alliance between the humanities and math. This alliance has two reciprocal parts: cultural criticism of the mathematical models shaping our world, and mathematical inquiry about culture.’ If science, building on mathematical knowledge, is the attempt to understand the workings of the natural environment and if technology refers to the whole interlocking network of tools and devices that issue from the application of science, technocrats make systematic use of technology to manage and modify culture—treating culture in the same instrumental way that the natural environment has been used by humankind up to now (and in ways that are now being critiqued in calls for ecological conversion). Technocrats usually put a strong emphasis on objectivity, planning, target-setting, logistical thinking, measurement and monitoring of

performance. They keep a close watch on the allocation and deployment of resources and their guiding values are economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

Apart from an instrumental approach to culture, none of these features, taken on their own, are in themselves negative; indeed each can contribute in benign ways to human flourishing. My claim is not that every aspect of technocratic thinking is to be resisted. Who wants to promote waste, ignore important evidence about effectiveness, or rely merely on subjective judgements and intuitions in decision-making that affects the public? Rather, my claim is that technocratic thinking is often associated with assumptions and attitudes that are not, strictly speaking, necessarily entailed by the features described in the preceding paragraph. The defects of what I am calling the technocratic mentality arise when the methods and inbuilt assumptions of a technocratic approach are treated as if they were sufficient—on their own—for a healthy society. Such defects can also surface when technocratic thinking is pushed too far and applied in areas where it is not appropriate, or when other key dimensions of human personhood are ignored, neglected, undervalued or inadequately developed. Here the humanities can play a vital role in deepening our appreciation of human nature and filling out our awareness of its possibilities.

Here are some examples of the defects of an excessive reliance on a technocratic mentality.

- ‘Data-led’ decisions depend not only on the availability, accuracy and reliability of data, but on what questions are put before and after its collection. Some of these questions must come from outside the remit of the technocrat if a holistic approach to humanity is to be adopted. Here the humanities have a vital role to play in helping people to ask the kind of questions that open up a richer understanding of persons and what matters to them—and the ends to which our personal projects and our political policies are directed.
- Targets can distort activities; a focus on outcomes can cause us to neglect processes and to ignore personal circumstances and needs.
- There can be a gap between the perceptions of technocrats and the actual lived experience of ordinary people; and this gap reduces the level of realism of some claims to predict how people will respond to policies and practices.
- Much technocratic thinking assumes a level of commonality among people that underestimates human diversity. It also expects rationality in human behaviour when many non-rational factors influence individual (and group) decision-making.
- There is often an inherent utopianism built into the basic assumptions of technocrats. Carr (2021) notes two false assumptions that are pertinent here. The first conflates information and knowledge: ‘if we give people more information more quickly, they will become smarter, better informed and broader minded.’ The second conflates communication and community: ‘if we provide people with more ways to share their thoughts, they will become more understanding and empathetic, and society will end up more harmonious.’ These two assumptions (or myths as Carr calls them) reinforce the idea that ‘if we get the engineering right, our better angels will triumph.’ Human persons, even when in possession of the necessary knowledge, are often inconsistent in their behaviour and in the valuations. We can act against our better reason and even in contradiction to the values we espouse. There is much ambiguity, uncertainty and complexity and confusion within human motivations. In its utopian mode, and with the inexorable drive to control events, technocratic thinking can lead us to lose sight of our creatureliness, vulnerability, mutual dependency and the bonds that bind us. Not all problems can be solved: we cannot create heaven on earth.
- Furthermore, sometimes experts in an area can be too confident about the scope and power of the knowledge they possess, and they fail to realise that this knowledge needs to be complemented by capacities that go beyond calculation, for example, receptivity, appreciation, empathy, gratitude, loyalty, compassion, humility, historical perspective and virtues such as prudence, courage, justice and temperance. These qualities receive particular attention in the humanities.

- Technocratic thinking can be very helpful in finding ways to bring about certain kinds of results, but it does not address deeper issues of meaning, motivation and morality, nor does its objective and neutral style of thinking bring about community. In contrast, living faith traditions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam have for centuries provided sources of meaning and motivation, of solidarity and collaboration, of celebration and consolation, ways of coping with life's setbacks and challenges, hopes, fears and dreams. As for the need to develop moral thinking, Quentin Schultze argues that 'Unless we cultivate virtuous character with as much energy and enthusiasm as we pursue cyber-technologies, our technological mindedness and habits will further unravel the moral fabric of society' (Schultze 2002, p. 17). He goes on to claim (p. 19) that, In the cyber-age, we become so enamoured with our technical skill at manipulating information that we can lose track of noninstrumental virtues such as moderation, discernment, and humility. . . . We replace humane, morally informed words such as "wisdom," "person," and "justice" with technical terms such as "information," "user", and "access." . . . Unless we focus as much on the quality of our character as we do on technological innovation, potentially good informational techniques will ultimately reduce our capacity to love another.

Schultze believes that the light of the virtues, as nurtured particularly within religious traditions, should be brought to bear on our use of technologies and associated technocratic thinking. These virtues are also promoted by the humanities, which, in different ways, yield insights into human aspirations and yearning, as well as human limitations and self-destructive tendencies.

If a technocratic mentality dominates all our thinking, instead of forming only one (valuable and necessary) component of it, then our individual and collective projects, while good in themselves, threaten to lead us to lose the sense of moral coherence and spiritual direction that accompanies the conviction that we are held in God's providential care. Among other goals, Catholic education should convey a sense that our current concerns and preoccupations are only part of the story to which we belong and, even if they are satisfactorily addressed, by no means do they constitute the end of our journey. By itself, technocratic thinking does not teach us to learn how to be of service to others, especially those from whom we think we can derive no obvious worldly benefit. It cannot instil in us a desire to search for and to share truth. It does not promote self-knowledge, humility or self-giving love. While Catholic educators should equip students to engage with and to deploy, where appropriate, technocratic thinking, they should also ensure that such thinking is supplemented by taking into account other types of thinking: historical perspective, cultural analysis, moral and aesthetic sensibilities and judgements, psychological insights, the nurture of imagination and creativity, and an appreciation of the political factors that operate both in support of and in opposition to technocratic policies. In order to provide a balance against the technocratic stress on activity and performativity, Catholic educators should also foster in their students the capacity for contemplation. The humanities can make significant contributions in all these areas.

When the technocratic mentality prevails, people find themselves enclosed by immanentism, confined by presentism, insensitive to mystery and neglectful of the contemplative and the mystical. Because of the insistent and intrusive presence of new technologies within one's work and leisure life, it becomes ever easier to fail to consider the transcendent and to refuse the light of revelation and the help of the supernatural. The power of technology to address current problems can make the past seem superseded and irrelevant as a source of knowledge. With inexorable pressure to engage in and judge oneself and others by one's activity, productivity and consumer capacity, one can become inattentive to vulnerability, finitude and the paradoxical and dependent nature of our experience. Indeed, as Anthony Kronman observes, 'Technology discourages the thought that our finitude is a condition of the meaningfulness of our lives' (Kronman 2007, p. 233).

Faced with what seems like an ever-increasing pace of innovation in all spheres of life, usually driven by new technological possibilities, and confronted by non-stop bombardment with information, it seems only natural to allow the world to set the agenda. Because of the dominance in the public mind of the reliability of science as a source of knowledge, many become suspicious of non-scientific approaches to knowledge. The greater degree of choice afforded to people by the advances of science and technology can lead many to exaggerate the importance of autonomy. The rampant individualism promoted by contemporary society often erodes a sound understanding of the benefits and responsibilities of community. There is also the temptation to think that the ready availability of information on the internet translates easily into the immediacy of understanding.

The technocratic mentality has its focus on problems rather than mysteries. It fosters consumerism rather than self-giving. It values control over receptivity and letting-be. It confuses connectivity with communion. It seems attracted by constant innovation more than by cultural continuity and the wisdom of tradition. It expects knowledge to be accessible instantly to anyone, rather than view it as the fruit of disciplined search and embedded habits. It fails to allow for the role of moral character and spiritual qualities in the path to knowledge. It envisages the world as a limitless resource to be deployed and manipulated in service of our current desires. It lacks a holistic, ordered and integrated vision and tends towards being reductionist. It encourages short-term projects (because of the speed with which our current tools and technology become superseded) rather than long-term or even permanent commitments. It is not rooted in a substantial and deep understanding of human persons. It is weakened by a focus on the present that is not illuminated by historical perspective. In its utilitarian and enthusiastic adoption of the latest technical and digital devices, it surrenders unwittingly to modes of surveillance which threaten privacy and autonomy. It can become an all-consuming, addictive, intoxicating tool that captures and colonises the attention, assumptions, outlook and priorities of its users.

This shadow side of the power and influence of technology was presciently noted by Romano Guardini. It was the temptations of power that tend to accompany the widespread use of technology that he lamented. Because of a false reading of their ability to control the world around them, together with a failure to exercise prudent self-control, many were led to treat other people and nature itself as an object and as a resource for manipulation.

The technological mind sees nature as an insensate order, as a cold body of facts, as a mere “given,” as an object of utility, as raw material to be hammered into useful shape. . . . [Man] has extensively mastered the immediate forces of nature, but he has not mastered the mediate forces because he has not yet brought under control his own native powers. Man today holds power over things, but we can assert confidently that he does not yet have power over his own power (Guardini 1998, pp. 55, 90).

And so, without curbing their desires, they let themselves be directed by external forces and find they have forfeited their freedom.

New management techniques also, in his view, tended to dehumanise both managers and workers. ‘Constantly improved techniques of stock-taking, man-power survey, and bureaucratic management—to put it brutally, increasingly effective social engineering—tend to treat people much as the machine treats the raw materials fed into it’ (Guardini 1998, p. 162). He poses penetrating questions about workplace encounters between managers and their staff: ‘Did the person encountered go away feeling that he had been treated with dignity, that he had been received as a person by a person? Did that other appeal to his freedom, to all that is vital and creative to him?’ (Guardini 1998, pp. 212–13).

When a negative answer has to be given to those questions we have moved into the realm of managerialism, a phenomenon in which, instead of harnessing the talents, coordinating the efforts and inspiring the energies of the workforce in service of the mission of the organisation, leaders concern themselves with the much more limited role of controlling employees. Targets are set for the measurement of performance and ‘outputs’. The context is seen as a marketplace for competition between different ‘providers’ and

those who ‘deliver’ a product. When managerialism is applied in the world of education, teachers find their work constrained by constantly new modes of surveillance and the need to market their institution’s services. Students are encouraged to think of themselves as consumers—which changes the relationship between teachers and students. Education becomes a transaction instead of being an experience of transformation. Conformity (among both students and teachers) is encouraged at the expense of creativity. Critical questioning of the metaphors and language that deeply influence how the activities and relationships of teaching and learning are carried out is in danger of being considered as subversive behaviour. The needs of the institution are given priority over those of the persons who participate in that community.

The practical theologian Stephen Pattison, almost a quarter of a century ago, searingly exposed many of the assumptions underlying managerialism. ‘Management . . . believes itself to be a politically neutral, rational, empirically based activity which provides proven, non-value-laden techniques that accomplish useful organizational ends’ (Pattison 1997, p. 51). In reality, Pattison, claims, it offers a ‘narrow, manipulative, conformist, stratified functionalist view of itself and the world’ (p. 52). A self-serving rhetoric fails to hide the underlying ethos, where ‘Even as organizations talk about being self-critical, welcoming change, empowering workers and nurturing innovation, they silence their internal critics’ (p. 116). Pattison points out that ethics and intimidation do not mix. He identifies seven of the assumptions that undergird managerialism, each of which is problematic from a Christian perspective: the world and other people exist for the benefit of organisational survival, exploitation and expansion; human beings can control the world and create a better future if they use the right techniques; individuals must be subordinate to greater goals decided by their superiors; relationships are fundamentally hierarchical and require clear lines of upward accountability and downward responsibility; the nature and condition of work should be such as to extract the maximum from the employee; everything worth doing can in some way be measured; the future can be colonised (Pattison 1997, pp. 161–62). We should expect Christian educators to offer an alternative vision about human motivation and possibility and the need to reverence the inalienable dignity of men and women, a vision that resists and refutes the assumptions and practices inherent in managerialism.

If managerialism is one manifestation of the technocratic mentality, Pope Francis has reiterated and extended the kind of critique of that outlook as offered by Pattison. In the encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium* he gives a wide-ranging assessment of the defects of the prevailing economic system. The economy excludes too many and serves the powerful. It promotes consumerism and waste and relies too much on the market for the distribution of goods. It increases the gap between rich and poor. In managing finance, too little consideration is given to ethical considerations (Pope Francis 2013, #53, 54, 56, 57). He refers to the loosening of any connection to or illumination from the depth dimension when he claims that ‘In the prevailing culture, priority is given to the outward, the immediate, the visible, the quick, the superficial and the provisional’ (#62).

In *Laudato Si* Pope Francis (2015) widens still further the scope of his commentary on the damage perpetrated by a technocratic mentality. He links social justice and ecology, the cry of the poor and of the earth. He reiterates the accusation that modern society encourages a culture of consumption and waste. He notes that nature is treated as an object to control, rather than as a gift (#76). One can be so blinded by the novelty and promises of highly specialised technology that the bigger picture becomes obscured from us (#110). Pope Francis argues that there can be no renewal of relationship with nature without a renewal of humanity (#118–119). Implicit throughout *Laudato Si* is the theme of the need for limitation and self-discipline by humanity (#130, 193, 223). But the principal complaint against the technocratic paradigm is that it ‘leads to a loss of appreciation for the whole, for the relationships between things, and for the broader horizon’ (#110). Thus it narrows our vision, fragments our knowledge, leads us into excessive anthropocentrism (#116), and makes us blind to the long-term consequences of our actions. Technocrats would benefit from a longer view of history and from a deeper sense of the intricate interconnectedness of all creatures.

In his encyclical, *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis (2020) pleads for social harmony, and he urges his readers to make sure that the call of friendship is not swamped by the demands of economic efficiency. He gives special mention to one feature of the technocratic mentality, the reliance on digital media. Of these media, he makes an extensive critique:

They lack the physical gestures, facial expressions, moments of silence, body language and even the smells, the trembling of hands, the blushes and perspiration that speak to us and are a part of human communication. Digital relationships, which do not demand the slow and gradual cultivation of friendships, stable interaction or the building of a consensus that matures over time, have the appearance of sociability. Yet they do not really build community; instead they tend to disguise and expand the very individualism that finds expression in xenophobia and in contempt for the vulnerable. Digital connectivity is not enough to build bridges. It is not capable of uniting humanity' (#43).

It should be noted that these defects are contingent, not automatic or necessary accompaniments of digital media. They can be guarded against. Additionally, Christians can draw upon the humanities to counter the negative features castigated by Pope Francis. (On the implications for Catholic education of Pope Francis' teaching in *Laudato Si*, see Franchi 2016). The powerful advocate of a renewed Christian humanism, Jens Zimmermann, argues that 'only a personalist humanism will produce an imagination capable of guarding against the subtle but ubiquitous dehumanising influences of naturalism and technology which undermines the embodied, relational communion of persons required for true solidarity' (Zimmermann 2021, p. 71). It is possible to be an enthusiastic and skilled user of technology and to deploy such technology in service of human flourishing, the common good and care for the environment and creation, without succumbing to the attitudes and priorities of the technocratic mentality, as these have been described here. The humanities can offer a significant contribution to this desirable outcome, and, for Catholic educators, teaching the humanities has optimal promise when given a Christian inflection.

4. A Christian Imagination

In their approach to education, Christians, over the centuries, have been influenced by and have drawn upon all of the forms of education available, but in one respect they offer something distinctive. The historian William Bouwsma argues that

Christian education is necessarily secular because, for the Christian, the most important capacity of man is his ability to respond to the love of God; and since this response depends on grace, it is beyond the power of education. . . . For the Christian, education could neither make man [*sic*] truly virtuous nor unite him to God, and any claims to the contrary were perilous to the soul. The heart of the Christian position was thus a distinction between the aims of education and the end of man (Bouwsma 1990, p. 377).

Although Christians have valued education and drawn heavily on the same kinds of cultural resources as other educators, their expectations of what it can achieve should be more modest than those who look to it as a panacea for all human problems. They are clear that it cannot endow men and women with the holiness that God calls for, even as they appreciate its humanising and civilising role. Thus, while Christians value the knowledge conveyed by education as much as any group of people, they insist that it must not be confused with sacred wisdom (Bouwsma 1990, p. 378).

The technocratic mentality seems inattentive to the anthropological presuppositions underpinning it. Which dimension of human nature is attended to and prioritised for development? How is the relationship between human persons and the reality surrounding them—biological, social, cosmological and spiritual—perceived? One of the tasks of the humanities might well be seen as helping students to ask such questions as these, questions that could easily be either ignored or the answers to which are simply taken for granted without being reflected on. Often the changing needs of our time remain below the level

of consciousness. Here the humanities—with their exploration of meaning in individual lives and in culture, and their emphasis on interpretation—have the potential to continue to play an important role.

In a Christian perspective, the humanities will not neglect to attend to the relationship between human beings and the divine as well as to their fellow creatures and the world around them. The goal they should hold in view as the fruit of education—considered in a lifelong perspective—is the maturity that reflects the stature of Christ referred to in Ephesians 4.13. Conformity to Christ is, for Christians, the goal of human development. Such conformity is not only the goal, but also the very path to that goal; for, as St Augustine prescribed, the pattern for living laid down by Christ, for our salvation, is both our homeland and the road to that homeland (Augustine 1997, p. 13.) Maturity in Christ operates according to a different dynamic than that which pertains to natural maturity.

Is it rightly ordered rationality that distinguishes the human person? Or is it a rightly ordered responsiveness and relationship (summed up as love)? Rationality is often embraced by Christians but, when treated as the principal distinguishing mark of the human person, it can lead to separating humans from the rest of nature (including their own nature). They can be tempted to think of themselves as superior, and to give in to an authoritarian impulse, leading to a tendency to objectivise and to dominate whatever or whoever is different. These are features exhibited in a technocratic mentality. To privilege responsiveness and relationship is more in harmony with Scripture and fundamental Christian teaching, as well as being liable to lead to ecological sensitivity. When rationality is over-rated, control assumes high importance; when receptivity assumes high importance, then we are less likely to suppress those who are different from us and more likely to develop sentiments of appreciation, gratitude and reverence towards the world, rather than to see it as a resource for us to manipulate. If, instead of mastering the world, Christians allow the transcendent goal of becoming Christ-like to guide them, they will seek fulfilment in self-giving and self-emptying. This is a far cry from inhabiting a technocratic mentality.

In order to transcend the technocratic outlook educators need to nurture the creative capacities and the imagination of their students. The Russian Orthodox exile, Berdyaev (2021) attributed great importance to these creative powers, believing that the Church had so emphasised the need for salvation that she had neglected to take seriously or to value sufficiently human creativity as a reflection of the divine creativity, and as an integral component of their being made in the image of God. He argued that, while human ‘creativity, knowledge, art, invention, the perfection of civil society, etc. are not necessary for personal salvation, they are necessary for the realization of God’s purpose for the world and for human beings, for the transfiguration of the cosmos, for the Kingdom of God, into which the fullness of being is included’ (Berdyaev 2021, p. 5). For him, it is in creativity that humanity most resembles the Creator (p. 26). He thought that it was a failing of Christians that they ‘fail to treat their creative and secular life as connected to and an essential part of their faith life’ (p. 55). As long as this situation prevails, ‘Their creativity, in political and economic life, in the sciences and the arts, in the inventions and the discoveries, in everyday morality, remains external to the Church and external to religiosity; it remains profane and worldly’ (p. 55). Then the Church becomes transformed into ‘a curative establishment’ one which restricts itself to healing individual souls. ‘Thus is affirmed a Christian individualism, indifferent to the fate of society and the world. The Church exists for the salvation of individual souls, but has no concern for the creative aspects of life, for the transfiguration of social and cosmic life’ (pp. 56–57).

For Trevor Hart too, imagination seems to be an integral element in human make-up as creatures called to reflect God’s image pervasive feature of our humanity, which is to say, in theological terms, of the sort of creatures God has made and call us to be (Hart 2013, p. 4). Hart uses a striking (and imaginative) way of bringing out the vital role played by imagination in human lives. ‘The imaginative is the psychical equivalent not of our appendix (which, when it becomes troublesome or painful, we can simply cut out and flush away without loss), but the blood supply which circulates things (both

good and bad) around our entire body' (p. 5). One might claim that, when cultivated, our capacity to be imaginative keeps us open to the more, to the unexpected, to the promise of the future, the surprising gift of grace (unbidden and not planned for). The exercise of imagination is a way of knowing what is not immediately present and it enlarges our horizon. Furthermore, it is difficult to separate out the operation of imagination from our sensing, feeling, willing, praying, reasoning, desiring, remembering, believing, valuing and the working of conscience. It remains active in all the ways we read and respond to the world around us as well as in our efforts to communicate with and relate to others.

The philosopher [Gosetti-Ferencei \(2020\)](#) defines imagination as 'the presentational capacity of consciousness which can meaningfully transform what is thereby given' (p. 5). It allows us to liberate ourselves from what seems, at first sight, to be given to us as inexorable and non-negotiable fact, 'to shift perspective and construct alternatives to what we already experience and know' (p. 253). She claims that the healthy operation of imagination has the potential to help humanity in addressing many of its humanitarian, existential, and ecological concerns (p. 255). Her comments about how nurturing the imagination can contribute greatly to countering the baneful effects of the technocratic mentality are so pertinent to the case being made here that they deserve extensive quotation.

Our technologies—some incalculably beneficial, some disastrously detrimental for life—proliferate faster than we can reckon with their effects. More than ever, it seems, we need to cultivate imaginative dimensions of our thinking. . . . If there is a present challenge to the health of imagination in many human contexts today . . . [it lies in] the colonization of imaginative thought, its commercialization and commercial saturation, and its educational neglect. . . . The cognitive environment of many modern humans is now characterized by almost constant access to information, images, social connections, and entertainment, whether enriching or distracting. . . . An ecologically stable future may require us to shift our self-conception as human beings, devise new conceptions of our existence on the earth, and balance a different understanding of nature with exigent as well as future human concerns. . . . As a power of consciousness that affords human thinking both possibility and transformation, imagination is essential both to the flourishing of life around us and to our own (pp. 256–57).

Given this, students should be invited to exercise their imagination in classroom and out-of-class assignments, to study the imaginative products of others in their works of art and to reflect on the nature and workings of the imagination as a basic human capacity. The humanities can help us in the nurturing, development, disciplining and deployment of the imagination. How the imagination is stimulated and directed affects its ethos and health. Some of the images to be found on the internet, social media and smartphones seem unlikely to foster a Christian imagination. However, great works—in philosophy, literature, poetry, music, painting and sculpture—can counter the siren calls of the superficial, the shallow and the dehumanising that clamour for our attention. Such works call for contemplation; they draw us in; they attract; we go on finding in them new depths of reality to explore, to admire, to be struck by and to be challenged by. They point to, without exhausting, the mystery at the heart of reality that eludes us; they bring us in touch with, though never in control of, the eternal that we aspire to but which always remains beyond us. At their best the humanities can engage students and draw them in; they can surprise, bemuse, move, touch, stretch and deepen the inner life.

While allowing students to appreciate more deeply the resources made available to them by the culture they inherit, at the same time the humanities can assist students in attaining a degree of distance and detachment from that culture. Jason Baxter illustrates the nature of this detachment by quoting from a talk by C.S. Lewis: 'A man who has lived in many places is not likely to be deceived by the local errors of his native village; the scholar has lived in many times and is therefore in some degree immune from the great cataract of nonsense that pours from the press and the microphone of his own age' ([Baxter 2018](#), p. 50). Baxter proposes four advantages of humanistic studies over those favoured by the technocratic mentality:

(1) The mental creativity to develop tools and processes that promote real human flourishing; (2) The strength to stand tall when your long-term plans run against the current of short-term gains; (3) The ability to let things be, with regard to their beauty and goodness, quite apart from any profitability or utility to which they may be subjected; and (4) The breadth of mind to expand the borders within which we ordinarily contemplate what human life is and should be (Baxter 2018, pp. 77–78).

He relates these four to the cardinal virtues: ‘prudence, the ability to make the good incarnate in particular times; courage, the ability to remain committed to the good despite personal harm; justice, giving each person (and perhaps place) what it is owed; and temperance, the restraint of my own actions’ (p. 92).

Let me unpack further how the humanities can contribute to the development of these four virtues.

- *Prudence* relates ideals to the constraints and opportunities of practical circumstances. This virtue depends (in part) on the careful attention paid by the humanities to the particularities of contexts, situations and persons; whereas science and technology are more concerned about general laws. Yet access to the infinite is often only made possible for us via our contact with the finite, the concrete and particular; our involvement in intimacy grants us a glimpse of ultimacy.
- *Courage* depends (in part) on the stability granted by having a clear sense of personal identity and vocation—a sense of who I am, where my roots lie, to whom I belong, and who I wish to be—and these can be reinforced by memory, historical perspective, imagination and self-knowledge, all of which are nurtured by the humanities.
- To care about *justice* depends (in part) on the breadth and depth of the receptivity, sympathy, compassion, and appreciation of the needs of others and the pressures faced by them that has been fostered in the curriculum; here the humanities do most of the heavy lifting.
- While the humanities cannot guarantee to promote *temperance*, in contrast to the technocratic mentality, they seem more likely to make us cautious with respect to our use of power.

In education, the technocratic mentality tends to focus more on modes of engineering—changing activities and processes by planning and techniques that manage the forces in play—than on meeting metaphysical needs for meaning, purpose and value. Those metaphysical needs call for a narrative that locates, coordinates and orders the various elements and dimensions of our lives, one that gives us a sense of belonging, offers us ideals and models, prescribes how we should conduct ourselves, envisions a future and offers us ideals for which we are willing to strive and suffer. The humanities can prompt reflection on meaning and motivation and offer a larger frame of reference than what is given by our natural endowment, social context, cultural resources and immediate desires. Students of the humanities become participants in an ongoing conversation with poets and novelists, historians and philosophers about the human condition. This equips them to inhabit, understand and come to terms with, and to articulate their subjective experience, as well as to open themselves up to that of others, and, in so doing, to develop those connective tissues referred to by Hayden and Harman (2021) which contribute to a sense of the whole—a sense that they each have a story to tell which fits into a bigger story that embraces us all. Without addressing such metaphysical needs, educational institutions are in danger of becoming houses of detention rather than of attention, of imprisonment rather than liberation, of constriction rather than transformation.

The humanities help to foster the qualities in people that help them to use science, technology and the tools of management in ways that are life-enhancing rather than life-diminishing. To find our true self and to find God, we must learn how to open ourselves to others and to experiences that are foreign to us, to entertain other ways of being in the world. Here the humanities have a role to play in training our capacity to be attentive and receptive and to approach others with reverence and sensitivity. In contrast

to the technocratic outlook, the humanities today should ensure that they include within their purview many features of the human condition that might otherwise be neglected, for example, vulnerability, limitation and interdependency; the particular and subjective texture of human experience; sensitive attention to otherness, displaying sympathy and compassion; the importance of intuition and imagination; the paradoxical way in which intimacy can bring one closer to ultimacy; a capacity to suspend the desire to remain always in one's comfort zone, to be in control and instead to be open to surprise, the unexpected and the more.

5. Summary and Conclusions

I have chosen, as probably other contributors may well do, to limit my attention to one aspect of the liberal arts, as liberal arts covers many different disciplines. As a sub-set of the liberal arts, the role of the humanities is the focus here. After distinguishing between the liberal arts and the humanities and clarifying the scope of the humanities, I have shown how the place of the humanities in education has, over the centuries, been contested and given differing rationales and emphases. I have then identified a major threat to the humanities and thus also to the humanising approach to education that is central to Catholic education. This threat comes from the pervasive influence of a technocratic mentality. I go on to unpack what is meant by 'technocratic mentality', identifying both its positive and legitimate features and those aspects which can be damaging for human flourishing. This mentality, while it is often linked to neo-liberalism, in fact can also surface in other worldviews (even when this contradicts fundamental principles of those worldviews) when they unwittingly embrace the assumptions of the technocratic mentality. Then I argue that the humanities, through their attention to virtues, to imagination and to historical perspective, offer a valuable counterweight to technocratic thinking. I end by showing the vital role played by the humanities in Catholic education.

Science, technology, engineering and the mathematics that underpins them have all bestowed huge benefits on humankind. The defects of the technocratic mentality, as described earlier, are neither necessary nor automatic accompaniments to the uses of technology. Those teaching humanities subjects are not immune from many of the attitudes and assumptions that feature strongly among those who embrace a technocratic outlook; indeed, when the humanities enjoyed a more privileged and esteemed position in the curriculum and in culture, they did not always lead to a more positive, dignified and humane experience of life for many people. Furthermore, many of the human capacities developed by the humanities, such as close attention to particulars, intuition and imagination, play a part also in the natural and biological sciences which underpin technology, though usually to a lesser degree than in the humanities. Nevertheless, it is in the humanities, especially when they are given a Christian inflection, that we find a substantive and overarching narrative in which to locate and make sense of human experience and it is the humanities that foster the sensitivities, qualities and virtues needed to promote authentic human development in education.

Catholic education has traditionally given great emphasis to the liberal arts. Right relationship with self, others, creation and God are at the heart of any education that claims to be Catholic (and catholic). The existential questions that are explored in the humanities, for example, those referred to in part one of this paper, make a significant, although by themselves incomplete, contribution to rooting education in what it means to be human and to fostering right relationships. The curriculum in Catholic schools and universities should therefore make adequate provision for the teaching of the humanities. I leave aside here whether this teaching should be given in separate disciplines or in interdisciplinary clusters. The humanities promote self-knowledge, including the capacity to receive, to let be, and to let go, to be content with not always being in control of events and to face ambiguity with equanimity. They assist in the development of the virtues and they prompt students to enter more deeply into the experience of other people, fostering sensitivity, empathy and compassion. They enable learners to develop a sense of historical perspective which equips them to resist the tendency to be limited by 'presentism', a narrowing of

attention that privileges what is happening now at the expense of an appreciation of the past experience and wisdom of humanity. In these and multiple other ways the humanities make an important contribution to the liberal arts, they offer powerful sources of meaning and motivation in life, they complement other forms of knowledge communicated in the curriculum, and they provide a necessary counterweight to those unfortunate (albeit only contingent) features of the technocratic mentality described in part two of this paper. In doing so, the humanities enable students to transcend that mentality without denying it a legitimate role, one that is subordinate to the humanising purposes of Catholic education.

It must be acknowledged, however, that, by themselves, the humanities—despite their valuable contribution to Catholic education (indeed, to all education) and despite their role in helping students to move beyond the technocratic outlook—do not suffice for overcoming the dominance of such an outlook. For this we must turn to the light of divine revelation, to knowledge of God nurtured in theology, to the sense of fellowship and communion fostered within the church, and to the culture of receptivity, gratitude, ongoing conversion, worship and praise that arises from Eucharistic living and which liberates us from calculative and instrumental thinking and the temptation to control that lies at the heart of a technocratic mentality.

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