

Opening Academic Year 2019, Koen Becking

Tradition and innovation for a sustainable digital society

A warm welcome to you all at the opening of our Academic Year, the theme of which is tradition and innovation. Let me first of all congratulate our new Rector-Magnificus Professor Klaas Sijtsma on his appointment.

Klaas, I am really looking forward to working together even more closely than we have already done for so many years. And thank you, Professor Geert Duysters, for being 'rector-protocollair' for the past few months.

It is remarkable that it was our students who chose 'tradition' as the theme for this Opening of the Academic Year, while we had originally decided on innovation. I would like to talk here about the connectedness of the two.

In the dystopian science fiction novel *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley, Mustapha Mond, one of the new world controllers says:

'We haven't any use for old things here.'

'Even when they're beautiful?' (asks the Savage, the 'old school' type)

'Particularly when they're beautiful. Beauty is attractive and we don't want people to be attracted by old things. We want them to like the new ones.'¹

This classic was published in 1931 and, over the years, its impact has only increased. How do we value tradition and innovation today? The balance seems to be tilting in the direction of innovation and new technologies. The question is more topical than ever: the recently published report by the Van Rijn Commission - the Advisory commission on the funding of higher education and research -

¹ 1 Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, Harmondsworth, 1932; rpt. 1961. Ch. 16, p. 172.

emphasized promoting and funding the development of technology, at the expense of the humanities and the social and medical sciences.

The report was criticized by the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU), which pointed out that the humanities are essential, and by the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW), and I quote:

'The weakness of the report is that the Commission has only looked at the system of scientific education on a macro level and from a financial perspective. In addition, the Commission's recommendations for 2020 and 2021 are causing far greater shocks to the system than the report suggests' end of quote.

Our university has also protested and today WOinActie ("Higher education on the barricades") is also protesting in Leiden, where the Minister of Higher Education and Science is present today. The emphasis on technical disciplines shows a contempt for everything that this university stands for, our roots, which represent ethics, the human dimension, striving for integrity, purity, responsibility. Values that have been developed and recalibrated over decades, with tradition and innovation going hand in hand.

Tilburg University has been anticipating these developments for years. It started in 1964 with Max Euwe, World Chess Champion and Professor of Methodology of Automated Information Processing at our University. He laid the foundation for the development of artificial intelligence at our University. At the same time that Euwe began here as a professor, the transformation of the City of Tilburg took off, from being textile-based economy to becoming a center for the development of a knowledge economy. The continuous development in the field of artificial intelligence is one of the driving forces of a rapidly changing world of technology. AI is becoming an increasingly important part of our daily lives as it is used in a wide area of day-to-day services. It is altering industries, from finance to logistics and from IT services to the industrial sector, with new products, processes, and capabilities.

Today Tilburg University plays a distinctive role in the technological developments in artificial intelligence. The university and the City of Tilburg are working together to strengthen the university's position as an innovator in the field of artificial intelligence. If we look at the past five years, Tilburg University, the municipalities of Tilburg and Den Bosch, the Province of Brabant, together with corporate partners like ASML, Interpolis, CZ, DAF Trucks, KPN, Philips, and Rabobank have invested over 150 million euros in artificial intelligence. We have growing Bachelor's and Master's student numbers in artificial intelligence. We currently have over 50 FTEs in academic staff working in artificial intelligence and we are proud to have founded such initiatives as the Jheronimus Academy of Data Science and MindLabs. And we have only just started.

Just like chess, artificial intelligence is about thinking ahead.

Tilburg and Tilburg University have an excellent position in the field of AI. And we need to expand that, combining our strengths and our commitment. The way forward for Tilburg University is to cherish and strengthen these partnerships that we already have. Unlike the way things were in the past, knowledge in artificial intelligence is not reserved solely to one party. Knowledge in artificial intelligence develops best when pursued in a collaborative fashion, and in this regard, we would like to reach out to those who have the same future-proof and entrepreneurial mindset.

As said, the focus on the human side of digitalization is very important. It is the university's very *raison d'être*. We all know that a one-sided development of robotization, Artificial Intelligence, and technology can be dangerous. Professor Corien Prins pointed this out in her fascinating speech on the occasion of the Rector's farewell. It is increasingly difficult to protect privacy information as a result of ever more intelligent algorithms. Prins said, and I quote: 'We need to think about the impact of technology on our public values. We must continue to operate as humans, otherwise robots and technology will win, and we must not lose our grip on technology by disconnecting intelligence from awareness' end of quote. This also leads to unprecedented questions about governance. Tilburg University has a long tradition of interdisciplinary research in the city and the region, its politics and governance. Recently, the Tilburg Institute of Governance (TIG) was founded as an alliance of Tilburg Law School and the Tilburg School of Economics and Management.

This links up perfectly with what we are trying to achieve here at this fine university with our contributions to enhancing society. What we have been working on for years, and indeed for decades. And also, let me remind you once more, with technology and Artificial Intelligence. Again I would like to warn against overestimating technology. At the same time, I want to keep us from adopting a kind of self-imposed underdog position. I would therefore like to once again address our colleagues from the hard sciences, as I have done for many years: We need one another. We are already living in a digital society, but let us strive to achieve a *sustainable* digital society. Tilburg University is driven by engaged academics who aim to understand and advance society; with solidarity, entrepreneurship, a sense of responsibility, and empathy: values demanded by our society. We aim to build on our traditional values, while also acknowledging that our society is experiencing complex social and ecological challenges. Therefore, this summer the University Council has adopted our sustainability plan. Besides working and cooperating with partners in the region, we also have a responsibility to work on societal issues elsewhere in the world. It is with pride that I can announce that our zero hunger lab has received a subsidy of 1.2 million euros for the next three years. In conclusion, let me summarize and round off.

Our university is facing a new challenge. We need to make clear that the “soft sciences” are not there merely to serve the development of technology and to smooth off the roughest edges. Rather, it is the other way around: without a wide range of disciplines like law, ethics, philosophy and religion, economics, and the social sciences to assist us, technological developments can be hazardous. It is all about finding the right balance between innovation and tradition, between the humanities and the social and medical sciences, on the one hand, and the hard sciences on the other. More so than the humanities and the social sciences, it is the hard sciences that need to become aware of the risk of bias. They can always call on us to work closely together and vice-versa. Our recent initiatives, as I have pointed out earlier in this speech, have shown that interdisciplinarity and cooperation are the way forward.

As regards the future of the humanities and the social sciences in relation to the government, I would like to point out that there are other ways of doing things. In Germany, the federal government and the *Bundesländer* have recently concluded a coherent research and innovation pact with the agreement that the budget for research and development, as well as for higher education, will continue to grow by 3% until 2030. This requires a vision of innovation and decisive action. Perhaps this initiative can serve as an inspiration for our own government. The recent initiative for an investment fund by Finance Minister Hoekstra is promising in this regard.

The contrast between tradition and innovation is an artificial one: the humanities, the mathematical and physical sciences, the social sciences, they cannot do without each other. We don't want a Brave New World, we want a Sustainable Digital Society.

Rounding off, I also want to thank the students for their input today. You also cherish the ritual of the opening of the Academic Year: the gowns, the cortège, your own traditions in student life. And these are subject to innovation, too, aren't they? Together, let us continue to strive for perfection, even if we may never completely achieve it.

Thank you very much for your attention.