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Viewpoint

Can We Reinvent the Modern University? A Vision for a Complementary Academic System, with a Life-Affirming and Spiritually Conscious Orientation

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Abstract: The current global academic system, rooted in a reductionist, materialist and westernized worldview, reflects the modern industrial era in which it took shape and is therefore ill-equipped to address the complex challenges of today's polycrisis. This viewpoint offers a vision for a complementary system aimed at filling this gap, one grounded on an expanded notion of what science and higher education can be and how best they can serve the world. It is part of an independent research and book project on the broad topic of *Reimagining Academia*, developed in dialogue with pioneering and spiritually oriented scientific and professional networks. Moving from the recognition of the principal limits of today's universities, the paper describes an alternative home for all those scholars, students, practitioners and social constituencies whose worldviews and knowledge systems are shifting towards more holistic approaches. Grounded on a new ontological framework and on a human-centered modus operandi, the proposed system would aim to revive scientific disciplines from the inside out, by means of new life-affirming assumptions and purposes. The paper concludes by outlining practical steps for the realization of this vision, proposing a global alliance of scientific, cultural, and social actors.

Keywords: new academia; future of higher education; science and spirituality; post-reductionism; new scientific system; holistic education; new scientific paradigm; societal evolution

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1. Introduction

Now, more than ever, the need for reform and innovation in the academic sphere is compellingly felt within a tumultuously changing world. More and more students, academics and members of our collective society understand that the current system—built on the premises of insularity and reductionism—is no longer able to cope with today's challenges [1–3]. Young people from all corners of the world, i.e., the so-called Greta generation, are reminding us that the current set of global crises requires a rapid evolution of our mindsets, tools and cultures [4]. Humanity needs a substantial upgrade in knowledge and wisdom: what and how we research, teach and learn must change in order for something different to happen in the world.

The limitations of the current academic system are increasingly evident, from an educational as well as a societal standpoint [5–10]. The way scientific disciplines develop and are taught reflects the astonishing diversification and awe-inspiring ramification of human interests and specialized needs. Nonetheless, it is also conducive to forms of hyper-specialization, hyper-intellectualization and hyper-professionalism that often depart

from common sense and are fundamentally misaligned with the kind of broadmindedness, imaginativeness, lateral and original big thinking, interconnectivity awareness, heart intelligence, mindfulness and personal integrity that are so urgently needed in today's world [11–16].

In most cases, the production and transmission of technical knowledge and expertise are not yet promoted within a broader framework for the development of human consciousness, one which, for example, recognizes that the industrial mindset and modern-era goals upon which the system is premised can indeed be tempered in their excesses [17–25] and complemented by new conceptions of the human purpose in life.

Self-centeredness around disciplines and specialisms, scholarly skirmishes and polarizations, egocentrism and careerism are often still part of academic culture [26–29], despite the fact that humanity is now more in need than ever of a different approach, i.e., one grounded in humility, self-honesty, mutual understanding, cooperation, and reconciliation. A hyper-competitive culture—among universities (via global rankings), disciplines (perceived as first and second class), scholars (i.e., "publish or perish") and students (due to decreasing career prospects)—is not necessarily conducive to the kind of clarity and restraint that the world needs these days, but rather it is leading to different forms of unnecessary profusion, over-complication, suffering and stress [30–35]. At the same time, while more and more young people feel the need to orient their lives toward a very personal higher purpose and mission, the current system is still predominantly geared toward westernized and standardized knowledge outputs that do not necessarily recognize the most intimate spiritual aspirations of human beings [36–38].

It is hard to overemphasize how the limits of today's academia reverberate through the rest of society as the kind of culture (soft and hard) which is bred within our universities inevitably becomes a key part of our social "software" and of our social institutions. Their sometimes conservative and strictly technical attitudes do not necessarily position them as one of the hotbeds of truly evolutionary social innovation and change, which increasingly happens in bottom-up and unconventional ways through other actors in society who experience challenges and opportunities first-hand [39,40]. To some extent, academia is still an isolated agent, ill-placed to fully understand the inner workings and aspirations of the rest of society and, as a consequence, it lends itself to becoming subject to powerful vested interests, financial powers, instrumentalizations and conservative inertia [41].

2. Purpose and Structure of This Paper

The aim of this paper is to explore what kind of change and evolution are desirable and supposedly possible in the academic sphere. The focus is not so much on reforming the current system, but on envisioning a complementary system through which a new kind of scientific research and higher education can be thought out, tested and structured. The paper proceeds through relatively short sections, which are organized as follows:

The next section introduces a vision for a new academic culture and system, deriving its distinctive elements from an awareness of the major limits of the current one.

- Sections 4–6 describe the pillar elements of the new system in greater detail, including its different ontological premises, its new approach to scientific disciplines, and eventually its preconditions in terms of new forms of academic training and pre-university schooling.
- Section 7 contemplates some of the most important steps to move from vision to reality, leveraging on a broad-based partnership of avant-garde scientific and societal actors.
- Section 8 provides a note of caution and the conclusion of this viewpoint.

The paper makes no pretense of being fully comprehensive, but on the contrary, is meant to provoke ever more accurate reflections, critiques and dialogues, both within and

outside the scientific community. It is conceived as a point of departure rather than one of arrival, putting constructive imagination to work, with the awareness that what might be considered utopic today could be taken for granted in the future.

3. Overcoming the Rigidities of the Current System: The Dream of a New Academia

Over the last few decades, the global academic system has become at the same time more inclusive, in terms of the number of students enrolled at universities worldwide, and more exclusive, both in terms of academic fees—quite resoundingly in the United States and a few other countries [42–44]—and in terms of the number of tenured-track positions in proportion to the number of PhD graduates [45–47].

A growing number of people who are gifted in research, teaching and serving society through science do not fit into the current academic system, especially those who are considered too unorthodox vis-à-vis its disciplinary, ontological and methodological tenets, and do not necessarily thrive in the context of its demanding, at time exploitative, culture [48–58]. At the same time, the school graduates of the world have no alternative but to enroll in universities because an academically validated title is deemed indispensable for the pursuit of most professional careers.

As things stand, therefore, dreaming of a supplementary and complementary academic system does not seem to be a dispensable option, but rather an act of civic responsibility, especially toward younger generations and toward our beloved world as a whole. In my specific case—and I cannot avoid using the first person here—the urge to think about something else and something different has increased over time, paralleling my diverse experiences both within and outside the system, in several countries of the world, in different social science disciplines and at different stages of my academic journey.

My extended professional experiences in the "real world" helped me to realize that now more than ever, an entrepreneurial attitude, which is both imaginative and pragmatic, is needed to rethink our social institutions for the 21st century and beyond. Being both an insider and an outsider of global academia helped me realize that the dream of a new academia is indeed a shared dream for many, despite still usually being an unconscious and uncoordinated one. In that respect, a new and complementary academia is first and foremost a system which is fully conscious of the rigidities and limits of the current one, and which tries to prevent or overcome them. Among others, it provides solutions to the following problematic aspects:

- The restriction and distortion imposed by a certain culture of separateness and distinctiveness, by which universities are thought to occupy a morally higher position in society (the biblical city upon a hill or the more profane ivory tower), leads to the development of hubris and devaluation of the kaleidoscope of practical and intellectual operations that are generated within it [59–62]. In this respect, the next generation of academics will hopefully dedicate more time and attention to the world outside of the lab, by regularly participating and humbly contributing to it with an emotionally equal, yet scientifically committed, spiritually conscious and morally grounded, stance. We professors will gain understanding of the scope of what we talk about on a much more realistic and nuanced level, by personally experiencing it, at least to a certain degree, or as part of a new kind of academic training.
- The rejection or diminishing of so-called "subjective" points of view, by which universities only aim at an "objective", unemotional and unspiritual descriptions of reality, to the point of ignoring the arsenal of alternative ways of knowing which are peculiar to human beings, from all cultures and ages [63–67]. In this respect, the next generation of academics would hopefully aim to be widely read and experienced in life, also thanks

to direct contact with non-Western and non-modern sections of the world which are greatly under-represented within the current system. We would also broaden our research horizons, expanding from the purely external world to the reality of our inner lives, which encompass thoughts, sensations, feelings, sentiments and other non-material entities that are far from being properly empirically investigated and scientifically understood.

- The incentivization of research over teaching. In the envisioned new academia, research and education are assigned equal value, contrary to the current system, in which the former is far more highly rewarded and coveted than the latter [68–70]. In this respect, the next generation of academics would be better prepared and trained for teaching, including through inspirational and unconventional methods, guided by a genuine service ethic. Doing research and publishing would still be very important, but with more discrimination between what is really necessary and original and what one feels compelled to do for more self-centered objectives. Academics and students alike would also be given more flexibility in deciding how best to invest their time, toward a wider array of potential contributions, personal goals and sources of remuneration, and with a priority focus on work-life balance and mental health needs. Our professional identities and growth prospects would not be closely tied to our disciplinary expertise, emancipating us from self-protective vested interests.
- The system's closed boundaries. In this respect, the next generation of universities will not be places to be frequented only or predominantly at a certain age and for a certain number of years, with us researchers and professors making them our sole professional home, but would rather be ongoing meeting points for society, i.e., for all those people who feel they have something to contribute to, or to learn from, the global collective pool of knowledge which would be built through them. A more permeable and fluid environment would pave the way for new unconventional forms of partnerships between (predominantly) scholars and practitioners, as well as between representatives of different world cultures. It would potentially allow scientific disciplines to evolve much faster and much more horizontally than is currently the case, according to renewed high standards of scientific and human integrity. In addition, both research and educational activities would take place as much as possible in context, i.e., outside the artificial boundaries of aseptic four walled classes and labs, directly within real-world natural, social and organizational settings.

4. Revisiting the Philosophical Fundamentals: The Opportunity to Move Beyond a Purely Reductionist, Mechanistic and Materialist Paradigm

Another major conservative element of today's scientific and higher education community is its often strict time adherence to a reductionist, mechanistic and materialist paradigm. According to this worldview, reality is described, explained and researched by means of conceptual reductions, mechanical analogies and material measurements, in most cases within the boundaries, schools of thoughts and languages of a single scientific discipline, while assuming that what cannot (yet) be observed in its materiality does not exist [71–76].

This approach can be highly efficient in allowing human beings to elucidate the visible structure of reality and operate within it at a surface level, but it also lends itself to being distorted by biases, assumptions and ideologies, with little awareness of the kind of systemic interdependencies and ecological properties which sustain reality from within [77–79]. At the same time, there is generally no openness to the possibility that natural and social events could result from deeper and still unmeasured forces, according to laws which are yet to be discovered.

Over the last few decades, there has been an increasing societal emphasis on the need for more interdisciplinary and systemic research, as well as for more knowledge exchanges and transfers between academia and the rest of society [80–85]. There has already been success in this respect, with a surge in the establishment of interdisciplinary centers and programs and increasing resources and expertise being put into practice by other players in society, though sometimes with undue influence and shortsighted or predominantly commercial goals [86–89].

Although the call for more interdisciplinary (and to some extent also systemic) research has often been embraced [90–94]—even if it is from within a paradigm which is still reductionist and not necessarily in terms of the attached academic recognition for its scientific proponents—there is more resistance to alternative knowledge sources, i.e., intuitive, holistic and non-Western, not to mention to spiritually conscious and spiritually inspired approaches to the profession [95–98]. These ways of knowing are considered unscientific if not rooted in superstition, despite in some cases showing an abundance of empirical evidence in their support [99,100]. The long-standing science vs. religion wound is still wide open: academia in this respect remains a stronghold for a materialist view of reality and of life, and there is little room for the recognition and exploration of any metaphysically rooted subjects.

What can be observed, nonetheless, is an increasing societal interest and need in this sphere, paralleling a partial disaffection with traditional religions and the concomitant boom of peripheral scientific fields which lend themselves to holistic and spiritual (i.e., non-material) interpretations, such as consciousness studies, quantum physics, transpersonal psychology, holistic medicine or spiritual cosmology [101–104]. Some of the most avant-garde scientists and educators in these fields operate at the margins of academia or directly outside of it, meeting via alternative networks and forums and sharing their teachings through new online educational outlets [105–110].

While there is no lack of holistic and post-materialist views and paradigms, efforts and languages are still very fragmented [111–120]. A potential way forward is for them to unite around an overarching ontological and epistemological framework or "meta-paradigm"; such a framework could be based on the working hypothesis that our natural and social reality might concomitantly exist at different levels—for example, the material (or superficial) and the essential (or fundamental)—which are characterized by different properties and operate according to different versions of the same universal laws [121].

Rejecting a priori any metaphysical openness, a strictly materialist science has little to no chance of moving beyond what is currently the most easily observable aspects of our natural and social reality and might be considered destined to generate superficial if not ideological interpretations of it, and symptomatic or suboptimal (if not openly out of target, unnecessary and counterproductive) interventions in it. The scale and proliferation of today's world crisis is arguably revealing exactly that, which is to say humankind's inability to better understand and transcend an ever more complex and problematic natural and social reality [122].

In this respect, allowing for a broader ontological openness might better equip us scientists to gain a deeper comprehension of the many layers of reason behind natural, social and psychological phenomena. Such an understanding would grant us more awareness of them and as a consequence, an increased capability to consciously direct them towards positive outcomes. It would also allow for the possibility of an evolutionary and even benevolent purpose behind life on earth, the human experience and the universe as a whole [123–125].

5. The New Supporting Structure of Disciplines, and Its Relationship with the Current Academic System

A collective agreement around the new ontological and disciplinary framework is thus considered essential for a new academic system to coalesce, with top-level unconventional scientists, educators and professionals actively contributing to its definition. A core group of visionary academics, students and representatives from all sections of our global society would have to join forces not only to devise its renewed standards for knowledge production and sharing, but also to recognize and codify how such knowledge would be of value for the rest of society, including (and to some extent especially) for the world of work and material production.

The new academic knowledge would have to be eminently practical, usable and expandable, not only to allow humanity to grow in consciousness and increase its quality of living, but also to enact different and new ways to make a living and prosper economically, in fully sustainable, i.e., win-win, ways for all stakeholders. In this respect, a constructive relationship and dialogue between the new academic system and the current one would be indispensable, as the new levels of awareness created by one would have the potential to inform the other and contribute to directing its development trajectories. The contact point between the two systems would pivot around the conventionally defined scientific disciplines of today, with the new academic system focusing on the revision of their fundamental assumptions and goals, in light of a new life-affirming consciousness.

In this respect, one of the core goals of the new academia would be to find new methods to unequivocally determine the ideological, self-centered and out-of-date components of today's scientific disciplines, in such a way as to declutter them of what is not universally truthful and edifying, and refocus them in light of a new ontological framework (such as the one mentioned in Section 4 of this paper). By so doing, a lighter and more essential version of each discipline would be born, one which would hopefully complement, inspire and recenter its modern and materialist counterpart.

Commencing experimentally with the broadly conceived social sciences—for example, economics, political science, psychology and medicine—each reductionistically and materialistically defined academic discipline would be redefined starting with the following:

- A reassessment of its reference authors and readings, giving priority to new ones over old ones according to the degree to which their description of reality is universally truthful, culturally evolved, practically useful and spiritually life-affirming in 21st century terms and according to a new scientifically defined evaluation method.
- A reassessment of what each discipline can still express, in terms of creation of constructive knowledge which *positively* reflects our natural, social and human reality and at the same time *positively* molds it through *positive* language (to some extent, following the examples of positive psychology [126] and biomimicry [127,128]).
- A reassessment of how each discipline is inevitably and intrinsically related to all others and needs to be anchored to a common set of higher-order values and a common Weltanschauung and conception of the universe.
- A reassessment of the ultimate social purposes of each discipline, in order for all of them to develop again with common sense and universal practical utility (vs. in self-referential and politically or commercially orientated ways) and with the ultimate aim of empowering human and planetary healing and flourishing (vs. perpetrating imbalanced social notions of productivity, growth, power and control).
- A reassessment of the dominant organizational models and modus operandi of each academic discipline and its counterpart in the world of practice, finding inspiration in the many avant-garde experiments currently ongoing, among others, in the business

and organizational world and, once again, putting the health and wellbeing of all users, i.e., professors, students, administrators and stakeholders, at the center [129–132].

- Last but certainly not least, a more fundamental reassessment of the ultimate nature of reality, be it social or natural, in light of a new ontology and cosmology.

What would result from this kind of basic work is a fundamental simplification, reorientation and expansion of what we currently conceive to be scientific and truthful. For example, the new life-affirming and positively oriented disciplines of sociology and economics would be built from a philosophical revision of their most fundamental concepts (such as work, money, relationships, technology), in a way which would inevitably have to be as ideology-free, spiritually conscious and in touch with reality as possible [133–141]. Also, their new life-affirming orientation would inevitably lead disciplines to partner around radically new and ambitious research questions, focused on the regeneration of the many currently dysfunctional natural and social systems of the world, as well as on the healing of our collective human psyche.

6. New Academic Training and Its Relationship with a New School System

The new academic system would inevitably coincide with the level of consciousness and practical behavior expressed by its proponents and protagonists. In this respect, whoever would be part of it would have to recognize the importance of a broad-based education, i.e., one which is not merely focused on scientific training but also on the reflected human experience [142–147]. In this respect, the training of the next generation of academics would inevitably include the following components:

- First-hand experience in the real world, in one's area of knowledge and interest.
- The cultivation of curiosity and love for learning, far beyond one's area of knowledge and expertise, and with great emphasis on the capability to ask new original questions.
- The practice of introspection, personal development, mindfulness and spiritual discipline, with a "student of life" attitude in order to discover one's elements of uniqueness and soul's purpose.
- The integration and harmonization of the so-called professional and personal areas of life, with equal attention and respect being expressed toward both spheres.

If these are the necessary preconditions for the new academic system to subsist, it appears obvious that the overall educational system would have to evolve accordingly [148–150]. One cannot expect to put in place new mindsets and attitudes if what one has previously absorbed and practiced is dystonic to them. In this respect, it appears inevitable that the new academic system envisioned here would thoroughly blossom only in partnership with a new school system aligned to the same Weltanschauung and values.

In fact, the two systems would have to be in a symbiotic dynamic relationship, with permeable boundaries which would allow the content, methodologies, discoveries and interventions generated through one to trickle down (or up) to the other. The same would be true for other systems in society: the better they are attuned to the new academia, the more they will be able to contribute to it and benefit from it. Ultimately, a new macro-societal system would have the opportunity to be born and recognized as such.

7. How to Make the Dream Happen in Reality? First Steps to Create Reality Out of Theory

Stepping from theory to practice is proverbially very difficult. In the case of the innovation hereby envisioned, what I find sensible to do is to start by asking the following questions:

- Who among all the researchers, professors, students and science/higher education stakeholders in the world—operating both within the current academic system and outside it—are most likely to welcome such innovation and might be available to co-create it?
- Which scientifically validated content—whether originated within or outside the current academic system—might already be available to be recognized as suitable for the new system?
- What kinds of virtuous-circle organizational and financial models are more likely to be appropriate for the new system in order for it to launch, support itself and eventually flourish in a fully inclusive way?

These are practical questions that, in a way, already offer a work plan for the next steps, and invite both conventional and out-of-the-box answers. What could be beneficial in my view is to start envisioning some kind of initial material shape which the new system might take, such as a new prototypical university. In this case, it will necessarily have to be a university *of the World* and *for the World*, in contrast today's universities which in most cases bear the name of their hosting cities or regions and are a direct reflection of the strong intra-competitive characterization of the current system.

Such a new university community is inevitably meant to be born global, with its founding place being an online location. In this respect, it is sensible to imagine something similar to TED (i.e., Ted.com), which is not only an online portal and repository for content compliant with very well-defined and sound standards, but is also a global movement of like-minded people who, in generative and participative ways, expand the system and localize it to the diverse offers and needs of different physical locations and cultures [151–154]. By design, TED allows the bottom-up creation of standard compliant physical communities, who are concomitantly contributors to the overall system and beneficiaries of it.

It is sensible to expect that the new academic system might naturally attract those avant-garde scholars, professionals and visionaries who are not satisfied with the current one. It would have the opportunity to be nurtured by those scientific and professional networks, journals, magazines and societies which are already working in ways that are fully aligned with the scope of the vision described here, but possibly lack a critical mass of their own to trigger change at the macro scale. The process of shaping such a high-level partnership is already in place, with plans to engage key scientific figures for each academic discipline in a round of in-depth interviews on the broad topic of *Reimagining Academia* (in such a way to collect indispensable feedback on this vision, and on theirs as well). Work is also in progress to socialize the idea of kickstarting a TED-like content hub with an exemplary selection of all those online materials which are already available and could be regarded as a concrete manifestation of the emerging new system. In parallel, representatives from the global student and young researcher community are being engaged in conversations and workshops meant both to explore their perceived needs and to solicit their much-needed fresh ideas.

What can also be contemplated and shared is the creation of a meta-forum for life-affirming science and spirituality, which would serve as a space not only for dialogue, co-creation and broader societal awareness, but also as a platform for mutual support and the alliance of purposes. Multiple constituencies might decide to join such a forum, including global student networks and cultural organizations, unconventional economic and business communities, organizations committed to the personal and spiritual development of human beings, wisdom tradition and interfaith communities, avant-garde school initiatives, and many more. In this way, the new system would not run the risk of being born in isolation, but as an expression of a comprehensive social partnership; one which

would keep expanding and would be the custodian of its purpose and the reason for its existence.

The new meta-forum would necessarily have to be highly interactive with the rest of the world, promoting conferences, working groups, multi-disciplinary dialogues, and leadership development initiatives concerning the broad topics of global science and education, global understanding and global peace.

8. Conclusions

Before providing a synthesis and conclusion for this article, it is important to acknowledge and appreciate the many merits and assets of today's academia which remain indispensable and invaluable for society and whose core scientific ethos should by all means be conserved and even further enhanced in the new system. Its merits include disciplined adherence to scientific method, methodical thinking and rigor, the requirement for empirical evidence and resistance to overly emotional interpretations, questioning and critical attitudes, training of the intellect, the inclination towards categorization and systematization, and a requisite for ample literature and peer reviews.

A reductionist and materialist focus is still very much needed, but should be carried out in the right measure, i.e., with a broader awareness of its unintended consequences when improperly elevated to ultimate truth or when implemented out of context. We can also become more conscious of the sense of the soul's constriction which affects many within and outside the scientific community, especially when we tend to compartmentalize all research and each researcher within ideologically defended boundaries, jargons and theories, often resulting in conflictual, disillusioned and ultimately mistaken views of reality that are perpetuated toward the younger generations of the world.

This paper can only scratch the surface of the vast topic of the future of academia, but it aspires to provoke a much-needed collective dialogue around it. Moving from the analysis of the status quo, the paper has introduced a practical vision for an alternative and complementary academic system, which is first and foremost conceived to address the more noticeable limits of the current one. In order for the new system to coalesce, it has been argued that different perspectives and avenues of research will have to unite under a new ontological framework, with partners agreeing on new methods to redefine scientific disciplines and academic training. Synergetic relationships will have to be created with the traditional academic system, with the lower-level educational systems and with the rest of society. A purposeful alliance of multiple global constituencies and stakeholders will also be needed.

Hence, can we reinvent the modern university? According to this viewpoint, we have a civic responsibility to expand our notion and practice of science and higher education in response to the new needs of societies facing massive, unexpected difficulties at all levels. The terrain is fertile for something new and different which could unite some of the world's most life-affirming thinkers and doers under the same roof.

Ultimately, reinventing the modern university is deemed possible, but only with a grateful heart and without resentment towards an institution that, notwithstanding its constraints, still represents one of the most extraordinary enterprises of humankind. Academia has immensely contributed to bringing humanity to the current level of consciousness and development. Now, it is time to turbocharge its evolution to facilitate our advancement, by embarking on a joyful journey of inquiry and experimentation which will never end and is more important than any predetermined destination.

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