

## ***Who Owns the Unexpected? Insights from Antigone for Don Lamberton's economic question***

Ruth F.G. Williams\*

*Department of Mathematics and Statistics, La Trobe University, Bendigo, Victoria, Australia*

*Dissent and assent contribute to new information and knowledge in that they foster ideas, avert errors and counter misplaced beliefs. Although intended to facilitate progress, innovation and creativity, dissent may be opposed by the closed mind and defensive mindset. Don Lamberton encountered a specific mindset in his own duties to scholarship in economics. Thus, the perspective of dissent is a fitting way to pay homage to his scholarship. However, this paper is also a lament. It gives an interpretation of Antigone from political philosophy which depicts Antigone rocking an ideological boat harboured by the polis. The silencing of Antigone's voice results in unexpected losses in the oikos. This is the sort of tragedy threatening critical and innovative scholarship in the twenty-first century.*

### **Introduction**

'Who owns the unexpected?' is the question which Don Lamberton posed in his inaugural lecture as a newly appointed professor in the Department of Economics at the University of Queensland on 17 September 1974. In full, the title of that lecture is *Who Owns the Unexpected? A Perspective on the Nation's Information Industry* (Lamberton, 1975). Lamberton's academic career involved a scholarly battle with a mindset which assumed that the relationship between information and economics is unimportant. Don spoke often of 'mindsets', and not favourably. He observed mindsets in many scholars. Lamberton, along with a few others, challenged conventional wisdom in economics, particularly a misplaced belief that had developed in economics, an assumption about the nature of information that had outlived its original purpose. Don frequently used the term 'the conventional wisdom' for such assumptions, a phrase that John Kenneth Galbraith employed in *The Affluent Society* (Galbraith, 1958).<sup>1</sup>

In honouring Don Lamberton, this paper pauses upon the fact that Lamberton's scholarly contribution to information economics involved him in the tensions of challenging closed minds. Lamberton worked for a lifetime on the intellectual blind spots he perceived in the conventional wisdom of his era. To discuss this specific perspective on Don Lamberton is to honour Don's dissent over a single pervasive assumption held internationally, and particularly in Australian economics departments. The emphasis in this paper is not on information economics *per se*, given that Lamberton's contribution is documented elsewhere (Lamberton, 1971; Macdonald and Nightingale, 1999; Potts, 2003; Lodewijks, 2007; Macdonald, 2014). Rather, it

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\*Email: [ruth.williams@latrobe.edu.au](mailto:ruth.williams@latrobe.edu.au)

is on the response to the mindset that had developed. Among the great feuds of science (see Hellman, 1998), this particular challenge of Don Lamberton is hardly a major matter, however, it is an example of something that is absolutely critical to the progress of knowledge.

As an undergraduate student, my first-year, first-semester experience of a Professor Lamberton (person and mind) did far more than present the elements of information economics. Don coaxed my cohort towards awareness that there are puzzling phenomena beyond the enclosure of received wisdom: the student was given permission to query mindsets via scholarly interrogation of basic assumptions – and the responsibility for doing so.

Studying economics involves developing not just an acute awareness of economic behaviour, but also an awareness that implicit assumptions can form in a person's mind about the basis of economic welfare. In welfare economics, a broad assumption is that the individual is the best judge of his/her own economic welfare. However, as with all assumptions employed in the discipline of economics, this has nuanced meaning and purpose. Economics can, as a discipline, serve to develop alertness to blind spots of the economic kind. Nevertheless, the discipline is not immune to adopting mindsets itself. Lamberton was well aware that blind spots and ideology lurk in the very social institutions responsible for new knowledge. Blindness is intrinsic to ideology. All social institutions, including universities, reflect existing economic and ideological forces, and scholars of all disciplines are not immune from developing mindsets.

The purpose of this paper is to put the human propensity for developing blind spots, for resisting seeing things as they are, in sharp focus, a focus informed by the lessons of the past. The emphasis seems timely. The paper discusses some features of closed-mindedness in the individual's information set and in social institutions. Some discussion about responses is provided. Dissent is just one response; to the casual observer, other responses also seem commonplace, such as endurance, passivity, tolerance, ignorance and so forth. It is not only scholars who respond to closed minds; other people, in their personal or professional lives, dissent from all sorts of received wisdom.

### **Defining features of closed-mindedness**

First, there is the feature of unfamiliarity. The unfamiliarity of new knowledge can be onerous: it presents something new to the hearer, and the hearer may not wish to bear the burden of unfamiliarity. There can be insidious effects. There is much that is unexpected in the unfamiliar. New knowledge may go untested or relatively untested; thus, unfamiliarity can produce the actual resistance that contributes to a mindset. Although scholars are drawn to new knowledge and are specifically skilled in new knowledge, unfamiliarity can obstruct progress in knowledge. This is partly because the ideas, facts and words that often separate those in disagreement are, of themselves, in the process of being clarified. They are new and often unclear, while an entrenched view or theory is better known, its detail more developed. A mindset will mistreat the unfamiliar, usually because the mind has developed rubrics and pragmatic ways of thinking. These can readily form into a set of prejudices which make life easier and more comfortable. The unfamiliar is relatively challenging, and acquiring familiarity can be costly.

The unfamiliarity of new knowledge helps explain the intense disagreements among scholars described in Hellman's anecdotal history of science (Hellman, 1998). However, the connotation of feuding scholars is unfortunate in the present context. Rather, it is helpful to be aware that the tasks in which scholars engage in order to shift entrenched views are deeply challenging for all involved. They are particularly onerous for those shifting the focus and direction away from conventional wisdom. Nevertheless, the feuds described by Hellman (1998) revolve around encounters on unfamiliar intellectual ground. There is often, as in the case of the different views held by Pope Urban VIII and the Italian physicist, mathematician, engineer, astronomer and philosopher Galileo Galilei, considerable complexity. Consider, too, the dispute between British scholar and philosopher Thomas Hobbes (author of *Leviathan*), and British mathematician, cryptographer and cleric John Wallis. Intellectual blind spots were involved in the feud between English scientist Isaac Newton and German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz over the discovery of calculus. These instances occurred in the physical sciences, but a more recent dispute developed in anthropology when Margaret Mead at Columbia University was studying for a PhD under the supervision of Franz Boas. Her subsequent clashes with Derek Freeman arose over research on adolescents in Western Samoan culture. The result was a schism in anthropology that spread to sociology and psychology.

Second, the information set of individuals has a psychological dimension. It may not reject all new thought, but some particular types of new thoughts are resisted. There is a human propensity to imprison oneself in the comfort of a familiar, albeit false, idea, to live in the ignorance of one's ignorance, to savour winning in a clash of minds or wills in preference to settling facts. The psychology of the closed mind can be partly understood in terms of cognitive bias, the human tendency to think along specific lines, resulting in systematic biases which are deviations from rationality and good judgment (Kahneman and Tversky, 1972). However, the closed mind is not to be equated with cognitive bias; and many cognitive biases are benign biases that serve a practical purpose. Mental shortcuts or heuristics are useful; wishful thinking is enjoyable; and leading questions can have social uses. In these cases, cognitive bias shields a closed mind from a fact and does not serve the purpose of open-mindedness. However, a motivational flaw may also be responsible when the mind is closed for convenience.

Third, let us consider motivational flaws further. The scholar who challenges conventional wisdom may encounter wilful blindness (Heffernan, 2011), which is a strong form of entrenched habitual prejudgment involving an area of knowledge or belief. Although wilful blindness has legal meaning, Heffernan's concern is with a more general human tendency. This is being blind to a fact, and it entails remaining in wilful ignorance, deliberately ignoring the obvious, and doing so even when the outcome is detrimental. Heffernan presents several compelling examples. For instance, there is the tardy acceptance by the medical and radiological establishment of the risks to the foetus posed by obstetric X-rays. The key risk of childhood leukaemia is well known now. Despite mounting evidence from the 1950s onwards, provided initially and extensively by the epidemiologist Alice Stewart, there was no change until the 1980s. Even then, change occurred not in the United Kingdom, where Stewart lived, but the United States (see Greene, 2001).

Fourth, there is economic self-interest, a notion that does not warrant elaboration *per se* as it is a pillar of economic welfare. Market forces allow supplier behaviour to constrain the self-interest of consumer behaviour; consumer behaviour appropriately constrains the self-interest of supplier behaviour; governments can play an economic role and, where markets fail, government action can raise economic welfare; and the law and ethics set boundaries. It is more useful, though, to refer to Coase (1976, p.542) and the propensity for blindness wherever economic self-interest is concerned: '[It] leads to self-deceit and self-deceit colours our perception of the outcomes of alternative courses of action'. Coase refers here to the intrinsic partiality of human perception in economic matters: it tends to be 'coloured'. This tendency is also known to afflict the decision-making of policymakers. The inclination is nicely summarised by Keynes (1936, pp.383–84):

The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed, the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually slaves of some defunct economist.

The final feature to note is the ebb and flow in the tides of schools of thought and the '-isms' within scholarship. For instance, some contemporary scholars are not necessarily disarmed by bias at all. The postmodernist is comfortable with bias and with the notion that no view is invalid. The notion is puzzling because of the human propensity for disorientation, which has ubiquitous implications. T.S. Eliot (1922) looks at this aspect of human nature in *The Waste Land*, portraying a multiplicity of lost people in many figurative lands, some dogged by *ennui*, others by profound arrogance. The point of *The Waste Land* is that while there may seem to be many paths to enlightenment in the lands of life, in practice there are many means by which humans may lose their bearings.<sup>2</sup> *The Waste Land* sums up the poet's view of post-war Europe as it struggled to become whole after the disorientation and catastrophe of World War I:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow  
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,  
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only  
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,  
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,  
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only  
There is shadow under this red rock,  
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),  
And I will show you something different from either  
Your shadow at morning striding behind you  
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;  
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

Ideology is beset with 'roots that clutch' and therein with its own blindness, grown from the rubble to which Eliot refers, whether it is from the rubble of war or the disorientation in contemporary times. How paradoxical it is to be elaborating on closed-mindedness to the most educated era ever to have lived. How unexpected.

### The entrenchment of the closed mind

The viability of any knowledge system, including science, the humanities, the social sciences and probably the ability to know religiously as well, requires certain social conditions. Appropriate trust is an example of these required conditions; truth-telling is another. Shapin (1994) is concerned with the grounds upon which knowledge is determined, and the social circumstances. He undertakes a detailed historical and sociological analysis of seventeenth-century England, with specific emphasis on the physicist Robert Boyle: 'In securing our knowledge, we rely on others and we cannot dispense with that reliance. This means that the relations in which we have and hold our knowledge have a moral character' (Shapin, 1994, p.xxv). A conclusion of Shapin's study is that trust played a vital part in a person's moral character in the seventeenth century. Towards the end of his monograph, Shapin contrasts seventeenth-century insights with modern insights. A key implication of Shapin's study is that either personal moral virtue governs knowledge or the vigilance of modern institutions.

On the one hand, Shapin (1994, p.xxxi) suggests that a major shift has occurred: 'Trust in familiar persons continues to be important in making modern scientific knowledge while vigilance has supplanted virtue in lay understanding of what guarantees scientific truthfulness'. The modern world may have 'lost ground' since the seventeenth century, though Chalmers (1995) has a different slant, feeling that Shapin overstates his case:

Contemporary scientists optimize their experimental design to the purpose in hand, utilize or improve on available technology, and take precautions against known sources of error just as Boyle did. By contrast, the system of trust so fascinatingly and illuminatingly discussed by Shapin has been replaced by a quite different one. (Chalmers, 1995, p.142)

Chalmers is saying, in effect, that the institutions are still the same, and only look different. Chalmers' view may be too sanguine, particularly if the lessons of *The Waste Land* are to be heeded.

Thus, there is a risk that the closed mind in the information set of each individual is not challenged successfully at the social level. This risk extends beyond errors that go unchallenged. The social institutions needed to avert blind ideology being shared amongst individuals may be undermined. The risk increases in ideological climates that fail to challenge, or where dissenting voices are silenced. In one of his discussions of whether information is a public good, Lamberton (1998) argues that information as a public good is a special case. Lamberton was also at pains to show that information is not a simple homogeneous commodity about which one can successfully make crude assertions about economic behaviour. Additional to this economic behaviour is the feature of social institutions being 'the more enduring features of social life' (Giddens, 1984, p.24): the intransigence of the mindset is readily entrenched when economic benefits exist in false ideas (Hayek, 1948). In fact, the risk is that a climate of blindness to entrenched ideology endures because of the very social institutions that are themselves propelled by entrenched economic forces. This happens where the openness of social institutions is eroded by political factors (Popper, 1945).

Lamberton (2007) voiced concern about this risk only a decade ago. He believed a climate of intellectual myopia was being cultivated in the modern university. Don

notes the metamorphosis underway in the transmogrification of universities from ‘ivory towers’ to what he saw as ‘dark satanic mills’.<sup>3</sup> He makes explicit reference to a fraying of the social fabric of scholarship and to the economic incentives perverting the academic openness that holds the veracity of individual mindsets to account. He predicted that the industrialising and automating tendencies in the production of knowledge would have insidious impacts on the progress of knowledge.

There is mounting evidence. Heffernan (2011) refers to wilful blindness at an organisational level, to denial as an organisational stance. Gabriel (2012) examines this phenomenon in terms of organisational pathologies, and develops a theory of organisational miasma. A dysfunctional approach has developed organisationally: ‘a contemporary version of tragedy where attempts to offer cleansing end up by reinforcing it’ (p.1137). There is also extensive evidence of contemporary aberrations and failure (see Cornford, 1908; de Frijters, 2013; Joseph, 2015; Murphy, 2015). Evidence is in the fine detail too. For instance, it is now common for university managers, and even academics, to make reference to ‘the university’ as if there is an ‘it’ which is a decision-making agent. This is mindset. This ‘it’ does not make decisions: people do – individuals in universities and governments. Those who trample carelessly on knowledge, leaving the land barren and tilling it onerous, are individuals.

Lamberton was a critic of dogma of any kind, and not just in economics. As well, phoniness sat poorly with his values as a person. Having observed intellectual blind spots in his own formative years, Don developed a sensitivity for intellectual blind spots, a sensitivity evident in his dissent from the received wisdom of his own discipline (see Macdonald, 2014).

### Insights into the tension from the ancient Greeks

The ancient Greek perspective is portrayed in the tragic tension of Creon and Antigone in Sophocles’ *Antigone* (443BC?, 1947).<sup>4</sup> The conflict in *Antigone* is studied at several levels: between man and woman, nature and convention, the city (*polis*) and the household (*oikos*). In the present context, the relevant interpretation of *Antigone* is already available in the portrayal of the tension by Smith (2012, ch.2). The root of the word ‘economics’ is the Greek *oikos*, or household.<sup>5</sup> According to Smith (2012), the tension in the play is over the limits of human reason and is between the *polis*, as depicted by the character of Creon, and the *oikos*, seen in the character of Antigone. This tension and its limits were widely acknowledged in ancient Greece (Watling, 1947). So, the closed mind is not a new idea: the Theban plays were attended by audiences of tens of thousands in ancient times. There is a true tension here as both Creon and Antigone have legitimate claims of their own. The chorus expresses popular opinion (Watling, 1947, pp.10–11).

Sophocles’ *Antigone* presents a profound concern for ‘the nature, limits, and power of human rationality and its role in human affairs’ (Smith, 2012, p.11). Smith summarises his key point with reference to James Madison: ‘But what is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature. If men were angels, no government would be necessary’ (cited in Smith, 2012, p.10). The circumstances for enabling knowledge, and wisdom too, involve understanding human economic behaviour towards unfamiliar and unexpected knowledge. *Antigone* reminds us that, out of this tension, there will be tragedy. Success is evident, not by outcome measures, but by Antigone’s voice **not** being silenced by Creon. Alternatively, when the *oikos* is silenced, tragedy is inevitable as social transfer ceases. The transfer of information



and knowledge, real communication, ends. The tension that Sophocles portrays in the characters of Creon and Antigone is relevant here because Don Lamberton lived that tension.

### Averting ‘tragedy’

Part of the tragedy in *Antigone* is the damage caused to the *oikos* by the dominating voice of Creon, who ignores the pleas of Antigone, seeking to protect her household, and who tramples over the institutions characterised through Antigone. The specific content of Antigone’s pleas is the fabric of the *oikos*. The conflict of *polis* and *oikos* in the modern university cannot be overestimated. The tragedy is the loss of courageous scholarship. This section concludes with two propositions, one for the *polis* and one for the *oikos*, both inviting study by future scholars. Much work remains to be done on the economics underlying this phenomenon.

To avert tragedy, the primary emphasis should be on the appropriate tension between the *polis* and the *oikos*. This is the first proposition. The case that Don Lamberton argues, along with other economists, relates to understanding the institutions, ideas, information, technology and politics that define the knowledge relevant to how capitalism evolves over time, including processes that feed back into the system. Lamberton’s specific concern with a pervasive assumption serves as an illustration. The assumption of ‘perfect information’ may seem trivial, but it is not. The prevailing notion is that consumers and producers all have complete and perfect knowledge of utility, price and production methods, and that quality is the same. Don argued over a lifetime that this assumption cannot be sustained. The assumption had become entrenched over time and the dominant voice in the *polis* of academic economics, fostering a closed mindset of the scholarly kind (Lamberton, 1984). This happened despite the scope for considerable heterodoxy in the economics taught.<sup>6</sup>

One observed in Don Lamberton an academic who valued academic integrity above all else. We can no longer ask him about scholarly tragedy in the *oikos*, and the suffering of the *polis*. Did Don avert tragedy? Not always, it would seem (Macdonald, 2014). The challenge for the modern *polis* is to respond adequately to current circumstances (see Frankfurt, 1982, 1986). Lodewijks (2007) provides further insights on relevant responses and where the shortcomings that Don observed lie.

The second proposition upon which to conclude relates to transcendence. A member of the *oikos* who stands against mindset, whether in academia or university administration, is someone who stands for transcendence. The challenge in invoking transcendence is found in the Apostle Paul’s words: ‘For now, we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face. Now I know in part...’ (*Corinthians*, 13:12). Possibly Don may not have cited the Apostle Paul ever in his academic duties, but Don was acquainted with human nature. He was aware of its mix of greatness and folly, and of the implications in that mix for the development of knowledge. Don grew up with the influence of Protestantism, with attending the Sunday School of the Presbyterian Church, and its traditions; later, he joined those in that era who no longer assented with their lips to matters of faith. It is noticeable nevertheless that Don’s actions in his academic life speak ever still that he became a scholar protesting **for** one’s personal encounter with Integrity. One knows this because, despite Don’s own shortcomings (these existed), despite also seeing himself with shortcomings, despite imperfections also in the scholarly circumstances around him, and despite economics itself being less-than-ideal (a matter on which Don spent an entire lifetime), Don

himself seemed to stand not just for the rational alone but also for the transcendent, as this inspires.

Kenneth Boulding, an economist who inspired Don, was a convinced evolutionist and a Quaker (see Joseph, 2003). Boulding sought answers to two questions: What does it mean to say that things have gone from bad to better rather than from bad to worse? and How do we get to better?<sup>7</sup> Being a Quaker, Boulding had an answer to the second question, and perhaps his sense of the transcendent also inspired an answer to the first. An evolutionist may see more of the transcendent, though 'through a glass darkly'. It seems that Boulding's questions were important to Don, who found an answer to the second in critiquing conventional wisdom, and hoped that in this criticism lay the way to improvement.

The damage arising from the tragedy occurs when the healthy tension between the *oikos* and *polis* is lost. There is considerable risk in damage resulting from losing the healthy tension between the *oikos* and *polis*, with the foolishness and disorientation that it causes. The violent resolutions wrought in the *oikos* by Creon's edict are apparent. Progress is sparked by this tension because of the choices made by people within the parameters of their social institutions. For Adam Smith (cited in Coase, 1976, p.531), these choices are vital:

It is not the soft power of humanity, it is not that feeble spark of benevolence which Nature has lighted up in the human heart, that is thus capable of counteracting the strongest impulses of self-love .... It is a stronger love, a more powerful affection, which generally takes place upon such occasions; the love of what is honourable and noble, of the grandeur, and dignity, and superiority of our own characters.

Coase (1976, p.531) elucidates Smith's meaning: 'it is not the love of mankind which makes the 'man of humanity' willing to make this sacrifice, but because he sees himself through the eyes of an impartial spectator'.

Averting the damage that closed-mindedness does to scholarship requires not only reason, but also hope based on belief in the transcendent. Reason alone is not enough: the very social institutions responsible for averting closed-mindedness may be the social institutions engaged in it. The blindness intrinsic in ideology is insidious unless confronted and challenged onerously. Governments as well as universities underestimate the threat because the people in these institutions hardly recognise it; and academics themselves, at least those who appreciate the dangers that lurk in blind ideology, may weary of confrontation, or they underestimate it in myopic pursuit of personal prosperity. Don always rose to the challenge, and never wearied.

## Conclusion

Don found in information economics a focus for his dissent from the prevailing economic paradigm, and especially the paradigm prevailing among Australian economists. By 2001, information economics had become almost respectable, and certainly the stuff of which Nobel prizes are made:<sup>8</sup>

I hope to show that information economics represents a fundamental change in the prevailing paradigm within economics. Problems of information are central to understanding not only market economics but also political economy, and in the last section of this lecture, I explore some of the implications of information imperfections for political processes. (Stiglitz, 2001)



The unexpected is welcome if we, academics and others, see in uncertainty the opportunity it affords ‘to ask new questions’ (Lamberton, 1975, p.2) and ‘to repeat old but unsettled ones’ (p.30). Answers are required if there is to be progress, including progress in the study of innovation. But questions will not receive answers without the institutional circumstances necessary for scholarly endeavour. Don Lamberton condemned closed-minded scholarship, and always retained his faith in scholarly endeavour that thrived on the unexpected. Scholarship that felt threatened by the unexpected was, in Don’s book, no scholarship at all. Not to own the unexpected is to risk resourcing tragedy.

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### Notes

1. The term pre-dates Galbraith at least to 1838, see Warner and Frelinhuisen (1838, p.35).
2. I am specifically indebted to Sofia Ahlberg and Nick Sergeant for clarifications concerning *The Waste Land*.
3. This is Don’s allusion to William Blake’s poem.
4. In this play, Antigone is a character who sets individual conscience above and against the might and authority of the state, that is, ‘the gods’. One sees her belief in a personal encounter with divine principle. This play is the first instance, of which we are aware, of such a character. Antigone, daughter of Oedipus, has buried her brother in defiance of the clear edict of the king, Creon. Antigone’s brother was a traitor to Thebes. Antigone’s wilful and yet considered act of disobedience relates to her deep convictions over family, kinship and the ancestral ties of the ancient Greeks. Antigone’s pleas are not just personal, but also a profound temporal and spatial dimension of the plot. To Creon, Antigone’s convictions mean nothing and Creon’s punishment for Antigone’s disobedience is that she be buried alive. Creon’s edict is not the end of the story because Antigone takes her own life. Creon’s son, abhorring his father’s cruelty, then commits suicide. When Creon’s wife learns of the loss of her son, she, too, takes her own life. There, the play ends. By the time Creon realises his error, it is too late.
5. The meaning relates to the household as the basic unit of family and for producing and consuming.
6. Although I was schooled in neoclassical economics, my tertiary education encompassed heterodoxy and countervailing ideas (beyond those of ‘Professor Lamberton’ in my first year). For a non-technical discussion of the diversity that still exists in economic thought, see Chang (2010).
7. I am indebted to Richard Joseph for this information on Kenneth Boulding.
8. The allusion here may seem to be to Humphrey Bogart’s famous line in *The Maltese Falcon*; however the intended claim is to Prospero: ‘Such stuff as dreams are made on...’ (*The Tempset*, IV, i).

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