

Socrates at Stellenbosch and Tutorials in Oxford

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Stellenbosch University at the ideological peak of Christian-Nationalism in 1961-1964 may be a surprising place to begin a discussion of the tutorial system. The dominant mode of instruction was to dictate to students in banked lecture theatres, very often supplemented by sets of typed notes. The official concept was of a '*volksuniversiteit*', in which scientific research and education served Afrikaner society. Political philosophy was radically different. Most philosophy students at Stellenbosch were preparing for their further training at the N. G. Kerk *Kweekskool* (Dutch Reformed Church Education College), for whom it was an abomination that students preparing for admission to their theological training be exposed to heterodox ideas. To accommodate the pressures from the overlapping authorities of the Church and the University, the Department of Philosophy was divided. Trainee ministers were directed to 'Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Religion', leaving a few of us the opportunity to study political philosophy with Johan Degenaar.¹

Degenaar's starting point was Socrates' disavowal of wisdom/ knowledge² and the claim to philosophic expertise. Concepts are always proposed as problems: They bring prevailing opinions and reasoning into question, with subversive implications. 'Apartheid. Now that's a big word. What do we actually mean by it?' Or Freedom/ Vryheid? a term with multiple resonances in that context. Or 'Afrikaner'?³ These are not just matters of definition but are of moral and political as well as of epistemological import. '[Socrates] put questions to people, because he really wanted to know how they would formulate the answers and wanted to give them a chance to listen to themselves.'⁴ The Socratic task was self-examination: 'The unexamined life is not worth living for a human being.'⁵ In C.C.W. Taylor's words, this 'expresses a central human value, partly constitutive of integrity: namely the willingness to rethink one's own assumptions, and thereby the reject the standing tendency to complacent dogmatism.'⁶

Our philosophic education began with three essays directly pertinent to the politics of the place and time: 'What is the University?' 'What is the State?' Then, as we prepared for the second year of our studies, 'Socrates'.⁷ In Oxford University today, these topics are at the centre of debates about the values which inform academic practice, the constitutional arrangements appropriate to promoting them, and the expectations of government as to what universities are for and how we should go about our business and to what ends.⁸ In Britain today, we are more than ever called on to confront questions as to the meanings and practices of civil liberties and democratic accountability.]

What are Tutorials For?

How is my own experience relevant to a discussion of the 'tutorial system' (other than as personal or shared intellectual biography)?

Different accounts of the 'tutorial system' and of its virtues may be given. The oldest may be that tutors instruct their 'pupils', who come to learn the arts of posing and answering questions. Tutors prepare their pupils for their Final Examinations 'papers'.⁹ Examinations may undermine the purpose of tutorials but, as I shall argue, may also be

essential to them. In its own *Revised Learning and Teaching Strategy*, the University of Oxford situates tutorials within a rather different framework:

- (i) independent and resource-led learning, particularly through tutorials and small-group teaching, that is responsive to the needs of each student and promotes his or her critical faculties and ability to identify and appraise relevant sources';
- (ii) the active involvement of internationally eminent researchers in high levels of undergraduate and graduate teaching, putting teachers' own learning to use in enhancing the learning of the students they teach.¹⁰

These accounts miss the defining virtue of tutorials: *students do the work*. More specifically, tutors set students questions or problems, which students prepare before they come to their tutorials. These provide the basis for discussions among tutors and students. Ten years ago, North Commission put the students' own work clearly and straightforwardly at the centre of tutorial teaching. They encourage the student:

to take an active rather than passive role in learning and develops skills in self-directed study and working independently, as well as analytical and critical skills.

to explore a particular aspect of a subject in depth and to give an opportunity to the undergraduate to put forward his or her ideas and present a critical analysis of a particular problem or proposition; ...¹¹

Preparing for and participating in tutorials enables and requires students to learn the skills of enquiry. Oxford students are expected both to read and to think in preparing their tutorial essays or work, whether in written or mathematical forms. Writing and problem solving are possibly the best aid to thinking – they require us to synthesize and to analyse sources and evidence, to interpret texts and to explain phenomena, and to make sense of them to ourselves and to others

The distinctive feature of tutorial teaching is therefore the method; but there is no method of tutorial teaching. Even within the same subject, different tutors will conduct their tutorials in different ways — and tutors may choose to adopt several approaches, depending on students, the quality of their own and on their skills, interests, and their experiences. There is no 'pedagogy'¹² of the tutorial – though there may be distinct or overlapping 'pedagogies'.¹³

How you actually teach is far harder to analyse, partly because ... it is doubtful whether any formulaic technique would be at all successful. My two principal tutors in the early 1960s were polar opposites; Christopher Hill never told us anything himself, but just asked questions and remained silent until one of us found an answer, while Maurice Keen did nearly all the talking himself, although it was always related to the essay one of us had read to him. If I found them both inspiring, it is difficult to know how far that was to do with their method, how far to their incredible friendliness in a much wider setting around the college.¹⁴

The tutorial starts from the essay to direct interactions between teacher and student.

The tutorial system is ... flexible, starting from where the student is at, and building on their strengths and interests. ... The depth and specificity of the exploration [of the topic] will exceed anything I could provide in a 'generic lecture' on nationalism, even when I am drawing on concrete examples for illustrations. ... You very quickly know the strength and weaknesses of the student and respond accordingly. ... The need to defend positions taken in the essays in open discussion often sharpens the students' analytical and presentational skills. Finally, the discussions make possible the introduction of insights and observations by the teacher in a less formal way than is normally required for lectures.¹⁵

If they are to justify these claims, tutorial discussions must be open-ended. Some tutors and their students may find it helpful for the tutor to assign marks for tutorial work. Like many other tutors, I never assign a mark to a tutorial essay on principle. The essay is the starting point for a discussion; it is not submitted for assessment, whether continuous, formative, or otherwise. Tutorials forego much of their purpose if they become primarily a way to prepare students to examinations. But at the same time, they depend on a system of 'public examinations', where examining is strictly separated from teaching.¹⁶

Tutorials offer teachers the opportunity to widen and to reflect on their own knowledge. At Oxford, college tutorial fellows are expected to teach across several subjects and, to the dissatisfaction of many tutors, not to align their undergraduate teaching with their research interests. Broadening the range of teaching may offer new and often surprising perspectives. So can tutorial essays and discussions with students: it is not only students who have to reflect on their own arguments.

Theses are integral to many Oxford undergraduate degrees. As with post-graduate research students, undergraduates require guidance and also interactions, as students and teachers identify and puzzle over problems together. The undergraduate degrees in Chemistry have long involved the writing of research thesis in a fourth year. Degrees in many of the Mathematical and Physical Sciences now have a fourth year, which is recognized by the status of M. Sc. theses have been optional or required of students in the Humanities and the Social Sciences, typically on more specialized subjects of the student's own choice. It is here, of course, that students are most likely to be able to teach their teachers.

Mine is, of course, an idealized account of the Form of the Tutorial. Tutorial teaching can easily become formulaic. Some teachers are better than others in different ways, or just better, and students are often the most qualified to judge. Tutors can intimidate students and students can exclude their tutorial partners from discussion. For their part, students are inclined to have a more instrumental view of tutorials than their teachers; students, with their tutors, will use tutorials, like classes and lectures, as a way of preparing for examinations.¹⁷ Students may find their work too difficult or lack confidence in their abilities; — though the tutorial system means that they will not be hidden at the back of a large class. Students may spend too much of time on non-academic commitments, skimp on their preparation, or just drink too much beer. Students are unwilling to be critical of their peers before their tutors.¹⁸ Students themselves tend to favor the most demanding and challenging of tutors. Tutorial interactions are always gendered though not always in the ways that might be anticipated. They are also shaped

by schooling, by class, by racial or by national origins and by differences of personality and prior experience.

Most of us move too easily from discussion to instruction to make things clearer, to cover the topics, and to prepare students for examinations. These are all legitimate and even related requirements of tutorial teaching. They are also the purposes of classes and lectures. But tutorials require more of students: to examine and reflect on the work they have prepared, even before, and often the night before, they submit their work to their tutors.

Tutorials for Scientists

Plato's Socratic dialogues may all be very well for philosophers and even for social scientists. But do tutorials serve any purpose other than instruction for mathematicians and natural scientists?¹⁹

Physics is a hard science and is as much about acquiring skills as it is learning facts and extrapolation. Like most scientific disciplines, Physics has the gold-standards of experiment and observation upon which many speculations and theories are impaled and fall by the wayside. What is absolutely vital to our field is the teaching of the skills required to understand this method and to unlearn a great deal of natural conditioning that we are all born to.²⁰

If Physics is a Hard Science, then Computing is Technical:

My approach to working with my students has been **first** to try to help them master the big ideas, and **then** to take a more rounded and **critical** view of the actual material of the curriculum. My approach is not simply to act as a "persuader/ trainer" for the theories and ideas of the curriculum but to convey a sense of where the theories and ideas are located in the "design space" (mathematical/ computational theories are not given by god, but designed by theorists) and a sense of what can and cannot be accomplished when they are used.

I take a positive ... view of the role of the "mistake" in learning. Many scientists are trained in school that mistakes are **B A D**, and for various psychological reasons ...they try to avoid getting into situations where their mistakes are exposed. ... I try to take them beyond this mentality, and I do it by making lots of technical mistakes myself (not always deliberate!) and showing that what is important is learning to recognise a dead end when they see one, and having the stamina to explore other avenues, and the skill (and "courage") to recognise a point at which an argument or proof or design went astray.²¹

The appropriateness of tutorial teaching of natural sciences is hardly surprising. Scientists generally work collaboratively with one another (though not on an equal footing). Innovative researches combine creative imagination and experimental practice with the disciplines of logic and evidence. It could be as important to discover which experiments won't work as it is to advance careers by publishing the findings which do. Tutorial teaching allows students to acquire necessary skills and opens students to finding out how scientists work.

What tutorials are not

Tutorials do not replace lectures. When they turn into mini-lectures, they do for two students what ought be done for twenty, fifty, or even a hundred. Lectures can serve many purposes, separately or in combination. They may provide a broad outline for a course. They can set out and explain basic principles, experimental findings, historical accounts, or theoretical debates. The lecturer can develop his or her own lines of argument, which will not be consistent with the views of other teachers. Lectures are performances though an understated approach may be more effective in many respects than a more flamboyant style. Lectures do not usually lend themselves to further discussion.

Classes are no more large than tutorials are small classes. Each has its own virtues. Teachers may use classes to instruct students in basic skills: logic classes for philosophy, maths for economists, language classes for linguists ... The mode of teaching is typically to set and to solve problems. Classes can also offer students the chance to present their work to other students, to co-operate in undertaking joint projects, or to take a broader overview of the subject than is done in more specialized tutorials. Laboratory demonstration and 'lab work' are integral to science degrees. In Oxford, classes and laboratories have the particular virtue that they bring together students from different colleges.

Research seminars provide opportunities to seek clarification and engage in critical interrogation of papers and Oxford has an extensive calendar of research seminars. Many are by established academics at the forefront of their fields or by younger scholars or graduate students. Undergraduates tend to think that research seminars are too specialized and, anyway, not for them; they get on with tutorial essays – or with many of the more appealing aspects of student life. If they do attend, they tend not to raise questions or make comments and are often marginalized by the culture of the seminars.

In the past, Oxford concentrated on teaching undergraduates and supervising research students. Many research students were not provided with adequate preparation in the methods and practical problems of carrying out research²² or required to demonstrate the breadth of knowledge expected of doctoral students in the USA.²³ Research preparation is now more systematic and the progress of research students more closely monitored. Research students always did and continue to work closely with their own supervisors (not committees) and as part of research teams and to be examined by both independent internal and external examiners.

The introduction of the RAM (Research Allocation Method) created fiscal incentives for departments to expand numbers on existing degree courses and to create one-year taught master's courses (as well as Masters in Research to provide a foundation for doctoral studies). Post-graduate masters' courses are usually taught by lectures, seminars and classes – with a few or even no tutorials. The paradoxical consequence of the need to provide instruction to students in large classes is that students are over taught. They have more hours of formal teaching, less opportunity of direct contact with their tutors and, most importantly, far less time to read than their undergraduate contemporaries. Whether this is a more efficient form of teaching depends on what you think teaching is for.

Tutorials at Risk

Almost everybody in Oxford (and all official documents²⁴), proclaims their commitment to the 'tutorial system. But there is also much impatience with it. It is 'resource-

intensive', that is: it takes up a lot of teachers' time. Too many tutorials leave students unable to give sufficient preparation and thought to their essays.²⁵ The increasing demand for graduate teaching puts further pressure on teaching resources, while the expansion of graduate taught students reduces the proportion of tutorial teaching in the university.

One solution is academics to reduce what have long been recognized as excessive teaching loads and be able to give less time to tutorial teaching is for more teaching to be done by graduate students and post-doctoral researchers. This may be to the benefit of undergraduates. Younger researchers will be less experienced but may be more enthusiastic than their senior colleagues. They will often be more familiar with recent literature on their field as well as on the subjects of their own research. Graduates who teach within the tutorial system are *not* graduate Teaching (or Academic²⁶) Assistants. They teach what we teach, rather than what we don't teach.

Financial constraints on British universities and academics (and also on their careers) to maximize their research outputs in forms which can be enumerated and compared place strains upon the scope for tutorial teaching. Related to that is an increasing emphasis on 'the discipline',²⁷ which means that tutorial topics and reading are likely to become more standardized and that tutorials limit the time available for research.

The fundamental risk to tutorials lies in the commercialization and corporatization of academic culture, with its emphasis on measuring and rewarding 'performance' by outputs. This formal rationalization²⁸ of academic life is stated in the language of 'modernisation'²⁹ in accordance with the 'direction of travel'³⁰ towards a presumed end. We follow modernity's yellow brick road that will bring us to the Wizard of Oz.

Teaching and Learning — A Personal Perspective

I have derived many of my better ideas by trying to make sense of puzzles in working with students, as tutor or as supervisor. If I am to make any claim to innovation, it has come from following the guidance that I first gained from Johann Degenaar. What are the assumptions with which authors and practitioners think and act; what conceptual and explanatory baggage do they bring with the terminology and the methods they use?

My own research has not been philosophical but firmly empirical: first in the study of politics in Nigeria, and later of Africa more generally. Research raised as many questions as provided answers. This took me from the study of politics to policies, especially land, agriculture, and rural development policies in Africa, their rare successes and their ubiquitous failures. Why did national governments and international development agencies, notably the World Bank, persist with policies, often of colonial origins, which had repeatedly been proved to fail? Instrumental explanations, political and economic, provide part of the answer, but not enough. It became clear to me that silly ideas produce silly policies.³¹ But where do silly ideas come from? They are embedded in discourses of Development, or in *devspeak*,³² which enable their practitioners to make sense of their own policies. Such policy discourses become hegemonic, providing the taken-for-granted assumptions that make policy goals appear to be self-evident and frame the recursive fashions of academic analyses and policy prescriptions. Academics, for their part, adapt their proposals to the prevailing language of funding agencies.

When I arrived in Oxford as a teacher of political theory and political sociology, I encountered a debate about the ‘essential contestability’ of political concepts.³³ I remain committed to this controversial view. The argument is not that the meaning and application of concepts or conceptions are contested. ‘Essentially contestable concepts’ are not embedded in any one ideological framework, nor can an ‘ineliminable’ core³⁴ to their meaning be identified. Such concepts are complex and admit of no ‘best’ version, though arguments may be made for better examples than others. This way of thinking about political concepts is a good point from which to start teaching political theory. Essentially contestable concepts are open-ended, deriving their meanings from the ways in which their elements are combined and the contexts in which they are used. Hence their relevance for analyzing the politics of democratization in Latin America or democratic politics in Africa.³⁵

If we take essential contestability seriously, there can be no end to the argument; it is the form, that of ‘permanent dialogue’ that matters.³⁶ Such apparent relativism is not to everybody’s philosophic taste; the claim for ‘essential contestability’ can itself be contested and even essentially contestable.

Which takes us back to my own concern with Development. Development is an ideological concept. What makes a problem, or a policy into a ‘development problem’ or a ‘development policy’ is the Idea of Development.³⁷ That is, indeed, a big Idea; what do we mean by it, as empirical fact, as public policy or as an Idea-in-itself?

¹ André du Toit, ‘Sokratiese vryheid aan ‘n volksuniversiteit’ in Dirk Hertzog, Etienne Britz, Alastair Henderson, red. *Gesprek sonder Grense* [Conversation without Boundaries]: *Huldingsbundel ter ere van Johan Degenaar se 80ste verjaarsdag*. H&N Uitgewers, Stellenosch, 2^{de} uitgawe, 2007, pp. 94-111. The definition of a ‘volksuniversiteit’ is taken from ‘Universiteit en Maatskappy’, the annual address by the Rector of the University of Stellenbosch, Prof. H.B. Thom, in 1985. In my first year as a student in 1961, I was fortunate to be taught by André du Toit, when he replaced Johan Degenaar, who was abroad on leave. In 2007, I returned from the Lawrence University Conference to find, unexpectedly, a signed copy of the Festschrift in honour of Johan Degenaar awaiting me!

² C. C.W. Taylor, *Socrates: A Very Brief Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 46-48, explains clearly that it is ‘wisdom’ (Afr. *wysheid*) that Socrates disavows, not ‘knowledge’ (Afr. *kennis*). Degenaar explained Socrates to us thus: ‘*al wat ons weet is dat ons nie weet nie.*’ ‘Weet’ is stronger than ‘ken’ and the root of *wetenskap* (Ger. Wissenschaft). The Afrikaans usages retain the ambiguities.

³ *Gesprek sonder Grense*, p. 269. Leopold Scholtz, ‘Goeiemôre, dames en here, my naam is Johan Degenaar’, interview with Johan Degenaar, *Die Burger*, 11 March 2005, reproduced at pp. 266-270.

⁴ Degenaar, Scholtz, interview, pp. 266-7.

⁵ Plato, *Apology* [*The Defence of Socrates*] 38a. [Cited by Degenaar, in Scholtz interview, p. 267.]

⁶ Taylor, *Socrates*, p. 106.

⁷ Du Toit ‘Sokratiese vryheid’, p. 99.

⁸ Congregation, the University of Oxford’s ultimate authority, held a Discussion on *Governance Discussion Paper*, on 7 Nov. 2005 and a Debate on 14 November 2006 at which it rejected a Resolution to approve changes proposed in the *White Paper on University Governance* by 730 votes to 456, confirmed in a postal ballot by 1540 to 997 votes. The texts and proceedings are available in *Oxford University Gazette* [www.ox.ac.uk/gazette/2005-6 and 2006-7], Vols. 136-137, Supps 2 & 4, 9 Nov. 2005; 23 Nov. 2006.

9 Students typically have three hours to answer unseen examination papers. They also commonly write 'collections' (mock examination papers) at the beginning of the term after that in which they have 'taken' the paper. Final examinations are graded into First, Upper Second, Lower Second and Third Class Honours. A rare Pass degree is now, in effect, a polite word for failure

10 University of Oxford, Education and Policy Standards Committee, *Revised Learning and Teaching Strategy*, 2005-2006. www.admin.ox.ac.uk/epsc/guidance/learntch07.pdf

11 University of Oxford, Commission of Inquiry Report (Chairman, Dr P.M. North), 1997, § 9.24 and § 9.29 at pp. 165, 166.

12 With due respect to Robert Beck, Towards a Pedagogy of the Oxford Tutorial, *Tutorial Education: History, Pedagogy, and Evolution, A Collaborative Conference on Individualized Learning*, Lawrence University, Appleton, WI, 32 March - 1 April, 2007, in this collection at pp.

13 In my own tutorials, I often ask students what difference it would make if they put singular nouns into the plural.

14 Robin Briggs, 'Tutorials', *Oxford Magazine*, no. 265, 2007, p. 20, and in this collection at pp.

15 Abdul Raufu Mustapha, 'Tutorials', *Oxford Magazine*, no. 265, 2007, p. 21, and in this collection at pp.

16 At Oxford (as in most British universities) examination papers are marked 'blind': anonymously by two examiners or assessors independently of one another and, if need be, by a third. External examiners may also decide unresolved marks and moderate the standards of the examinations as a whole. Teachers may not examine the theses they have supervised. This separation excludes the possibility of students' asking for their marks to be revised (upwards!).

17 North Report, §9.31-32, p. 166. Duna Sabri, 'Student's Experience of the Formative Assessment of Essays' explores perceptively the experiences in Archeology and in History of both students and tutors. Paper for *Tutorial Education: History, Pedagogy and Evolution* and in this collection at pp.

18 North Report, §9.31-32, p. 166. Duna Sabri, 'Student's Experience of the Formative Assessment of Essays' explores perceptively the experiences in Archeology and in History of both students and tutors. Paper for *Tutorial Education: History, Pedagogy and Evolution* and in this collection at pp.

19 See the contributions to *Tutorial Education: History, Pedagogy and Evolution* by Sarah Bolton and Andrea Danyluk, from Williams College; Nancy Berner, Sewanee: University of the South; and Elizabeth de Stasio, Raymond H. Herzog, Matthew Ansfield, at Lawrence University.

20 Dr. Todd Huffman, 'Tutorials', *Oxford Magazine*, no. 265, 2007, pp. 20-21, and in this collection at pp.

21 Bernard Sufrin, 'Tutorials', *Oxford Magazine*, no. 265, 2007, p. 21, and in this collection at pp.

22 See the Oxford collection: Stephen Devereaux and John Hoddinott, ed., *Fieldwork in Developing Countries*, Lynne Rienner, 1993, a guide to fieldwork methods, which responded to these inadequacies.

23 An exception to this was and is the two-year B. Phil. in Philosophy and (what are now) M. Phil. in the humanities and social sciences.

24 University of Oxford, *Corporate Plan, 2005/6 to 2009/10*, 2005, Strategy II (a) and (b).

25 The Franks Commission recommended in 1966 that students not be expected to have more than one tutorial a week. University of Oxford, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry*, (Chairman: Lord Frank) 1966, vol. 1, §§ 227-238, North Report, §§ 9.30.

26 University of Oxford, *Corporate Plan, 2005/6 to 2009/10*, 2005, Strategy II (f).

27 Embodied in the 'RAE', the national Research Assessment Exercise.

28 'Formal and substantive rationality ... are always, in principle, in conflict with one another' Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, University of California Press, 1968). p. 85.

29 HM Treasury, *Lambert Review of Business-University Collaboration*, Final Report 4 December 2003, 7.48, cited University of Oxford, *White Paper on University Governance*, Trinity Term, 2006, § 62.

30 University of Oxford, *Consultation on a proposed 'direction of travel': communication from the Task Force on Academic Employment*, 2007, [www.admin.ox.ac.uk]

31 Gavin Williams, 'Taking the part of peasants: rural development in Nigeria and Tanzania' in P.C.W. Gutkind and Immanuel Wallerstein, eds, *The Political Economy of Contemporary Africa*, Sage, 1975/1985; and Judith Heyer, Pepe Roberts and Gavin Williams, eds, *Rural Development in Tropical Africa*, Macmillan/ St Martin's Press, 1981, Introduction.

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- 32 Gavin Williams, *The World Bank and the Contradictions of the State in Africa*, published as 'Les contradictions de la Banque mondiale et la crise de l'Etat en Afrique.' in Emmanuel Terray ed., *L'Etat contemporain en Afrique*, L'Harmattan, Paris, p. 362 n1, translated there as 'langage du développement'. p. 362, n 1. James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: "Development", Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 259.
- 33 W.B. Gallie, Essentially contested concepts, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. 56, 1955-56, pp. 167-198. It was the focus of a debate about power initiated by Steven Lukes: *Power: a Radical View*, Humanities Press, 1974 (2nd ed. 1997).
- 34 Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach*, Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 62.
- 35 Laurence Whitehead, *Democratization: Theory and Experience*, Oxford University Press, 2002, chapter 1. Gavin Williams, 'Democracy as Idea and Democracy as Process in Africa' *The Journal of African American History*, Vol. 88, No. 4, *Africa and Globalization*, 2003, pp. 339-340.
- 36 Angelina Todorova, 'On the "Two Platos" and Modern Political Concepts Debate,' B.A. Thesis, St Peter's College, Oxford University, 2002, p. 26.
- 37 Gavin Williams, 'Studying Development and Explaining Policies', *Oxford Development Studies*, 31, 1, pp. 37-38.