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Wilde uncertainty: on knowing where we are going

The more mechanical people to whom life is a shrewd speculation depending on a careful calculation of ways and means, always know where they are going, and go there [...] A man whose desire is to be something separate from himself, to be a member of Parliament, or a successful grocer, or a prominent solicitor, or a judge, or something equally tedious, invariably succeeds in being what he wants to be. That is his punishment. Those who want a mask have to wear it.

But with the dynamic forces of life, and those in whom those dynamic forces become incarnate, it is different. People whose desire is solely for self-realisation never know where they are going. They can't know. In one sense of the word it is of course necessary, as the Greek oracle said, to know oneself: that is the first achievement of knowledge. But to recognise that the soul of a man is unknowable, is the ultimate achievement of wisdom.

Oscar Wilde, "De Profundis" ¹

There is a sense of certainty and longevity in those trades Wilde lists: grocer, MP, judge. In 1897 this might have been so; not in 2024. By various estimations, the average person is now likely to have many careers in their lifetime – three? Five? Seven?^{2,3} As industries are retooled through technological and managerial innovation, jobs and even professions that once seemed stable, contracts that said "permanent" when they were signed, melt away while new structures and skills are called forth.⁴

If they are masks, as Wilde uncharitably called them, they must be changed several times over in the course of a working life.

How can we offer young people a tertiary education that will equip them for such a volatile, unknowable professional future? No wonder that we call for some kind of enduring curriculum to offer our students. 21st century skills: transferrable, flexible, human skills like communication, creativity, problem solving.⁵ Our graduates will be prepared not for a job, not for a profession, but for a career portfolio.

This vision was conceived

before it became clear that such "human" skills could be "learned" and performed by generative machine learning algorithms.^{6,7} Debates about whether such outputs are truly creative, truly innovative, etcetera, are immaterial when the point is this: in terms of productivity, *they amount to the same thing*. Again, the mask slips. Our graduates cannot take comfort in the perpetuity of the value of their skills: these too can be superseded.

Wilde offered no comforting essential stability. By his reckoning, those who refuse a mask are fated to a life of uncertainty: they "never know where they are going", they "can't know". Writing from prison after a career of literature and social deviancy,

Wilde was lost, but defiant and unrepentant. He was reflecting on the nature of the "artistic life", but the "mechanical" life he disparaged is also now beginning to sink into the mist of precarity. It is the roles that are most easily calculated that are the most easily automated.

But all this implies that success derives from our being designated roles by others around us. To know where one is going (if one has never been there before) suggests one has consulted a map made by others. If we don't know what lies ahead, is it time to put our maps to the side and learn how to be lost together?



[1] Wilde, O. (1897) *De Profundis*. Project Gutenberg. <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/921>

[2] Broom, D. (2023). 2023. *Having many careers will be the norm, experts say*. World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/05/workers-multiple-careers-jobs-skills/>

[3] Foundation for Young Australians. (2017). *The New Work Order: Ensuring young Australians have skills and experience for the jobs of the future, not the past*. Foundation for Young Australians.

[4] Bauman, Z. (2005). Education in liquid modernity. *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 27(4), 303–17.

[5] Rotherham, A. J., & Willingham, D. T. (2010). "21st-century" skills: Not new, but a worthy challenge. *American Educator*, 34(1), 17–20.

[6] Franceschelli, G., & Musolesi, M. (2023). On the creativity of large language models. *arXiv preprint*.

[7] Renze, M., & Guven, E. (2024). Self-reflection in LLM agents: Effects on problem-solving performance. *arXiv preprint*.