Introduction: Thinking about Ireland's Future, Then and Now

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What would we like Ireland to look like in 2030? In what kind of society do we want to live, on both sides of the border? This seems like a simple question. 2030 is just seven years away, so surely politicians, intellectuals, journalists, and the general public are busy imagining our future. But this is not really happening. Initiatives like Project Ireland 2040, a national development plan for the Republic of Ireland, have in the past several years been overshadowed by emergencies that have demanded all our attention: climate change, Brexit, the Covid pandemic, and now the war in Ukraine.[1] These emergencies have forced us to into a reactive, crisis-response mode. There is a sense that events are unfolding so fast that we can hardly keep up. This raises the question: Are we still shaping our future or are we merely adapting, breathlessly, to the rapid changes that characterize life in the twenty-first century?

On four Wednesdays in May 2022, the Royal Irish Academy (RIA) organized four seminars under the title 'Ireland 2030' in order to provide a forum for thinking about ways in which meaningful human agency can be regained, specifically on the island of Ireland and in a time of globally accelerated change. Under the auspices of two RIA committees – the Committee on Ethical, Political, Legal, and Philosophical Studies and *Coiste Léann na Gaeilge, Litríocht na Gaeilge agus na gCultúr Ceilteach* – each Wednesday four scholars and engaged citizens met with an online audience to discuss the future of Ireland.[2] Although each of the seminars was devoted to a different topic, the effects of economic and technological progress on life in this island provided the guiding thread.

For this issue of *Studies*, six of the panellists from the Academy's Ireland 2030 initiative have agreed to revise their presentations. Before providing a brief overview of the papers, I would by way of introduction like to offer some reflections on what thinking about the future means. How does one approach the task? Does one imagine the future as an extension of the present, and thus

attempt to extrapolate from the present to times yet to come? Or is thinking about the future a matter of imagining, more or less realistically, some ideal state that one will subsequently endeavour to bring about? Also, is there a relationship not only between the present and the future, but also between the future and the past?

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No doubt the twentieth century's most famous attempt to articulate a coherent vision of the future of Ireland, and to do so in a politically effective way, is the speech that An Taoiseach Éamon de Valera recorded for St Patrick's Day, 1943.[3] Or should I have said 'infamous attempt'? For many have regarded this speech as epitomizing a backward attitude which, rather than promoting a promising future, in fact ended up preventing it. This is, for instance, the argument in Tom Garvin's influential book, *Preventing the Future: Why Was Ireland So Poor for So Long?*[4] The historian Joe Lee (who defended the speech) once remarked that de Valera's 'vision […] is usually invoked nowadays only in mockery of the image of "comely maidens dancing at the crossroads"'.[5] There is a twofold problem with such mockery. The first, smaller one, concerns the fact that de Valera never uttered the phrase in question.[6] The second, much more significant problem, is that de Valera's critics hardly ever appear to have read the speech in its entirety, and thus to have endeavoured to understand the argument that it advances. Garvin exemplifies this attitude of hasty dismissiveness: having quoted the speech's most famous paragraph (and nothing else from its three pages), he proceeds to accuse de Valera of pursuing 'an extremely focused short-term purpose' and engaging in 'political opportunism'.[7] He does so after expressing surprise that the speech 'was not found to be irrelevant or even comic'.[8]

I want to suggest here that a reappraisal may be in order. More than previous generations, we are able to appreciate the price that has to be paid for economic progress. The social upheaval that occurred as a result of the Celtic Tiger was already a wake-up call.[9] Now that global warming and climate change are in the news every day, we also know the environmental cost of rapid economic development. The time may be right, therefore, to re-examine an older vision of the future of Ireland by looking back at the some of the ideals that animated the founders of the modern Irish state. In doing so, I am going to pay more attention to the structure of de Valera's approach than to

many of the details of his vision – interesting as it would be to explore them.

Already the speech's title is intriguing: 'The Ireland that we dreamed of'.[10] Why 'dreamed of', in the past tense? Is the objective of the speech not to discuss the future? Indeed it is, but de Valera is convinced that an authentic vision for the future must come from a renewed appreciation of the past. His speech belongs in the tradition of Irish revivalism.[11] Furthermore, note the personal pronoun 'we'. The ideas proposed here represent, or at least claim to represent, something like the collective wisdom of the revolutionary generation – the 'vivid faces' to whom Yeats refers in his poem 'Easter 1916'.[12] 'The Ireland that we dreamed of' is far more than de Valera's personal project.

Yet another possible misunderstanding needs to be dispelled. The objective of the 'dream' speech was not to provide a triumphalist description of the state of the island in 1943. To assume this, and hence to accuse de Valera of romantic detachment from reality, would be a fundamental misreading. After all, the Taoiseach himself acknowledges that a 'section of our people have not yet [the] minimum' of material comfort needful for dignified human life (p. 467).[13] Rather, the point of the speech is to create an image or even 'myth' of an ideal Ireland powerful enough to support the development of the country as an independent nation with a distinctive cultural identity.[14] In particular, the emphasis on frugality and the beauty of simple countryside living serves the purpose of demarcating the Irish way of life from that of industrialized Britain.[15]

But let us return to our main point, which is to use de Valera's speech as an occasion to reflect on the structure of thinking fruitfully about the future. De Valera's starting point is the past. He is convinced that the future cannot adequately be conceived as merely the logical continuation of a present trajectory. This is why he recalls, in a couple of densely packed paragraphs, some of the high points of 1,500 years of Irish history, from St Patrick and the achievements of the 'golden age', when Ireland earned the title 'the Island of Saints and Scholars' (p. 466), to the more recent movements of the Young Irelanders, the Gaelic League, and the Volunteers. Out of this history, he distils his own narrative, most famously summarized in the following oft-quoted paragraph:

> That Ireland which we dreamed of would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as a basis for right living, of a people

> who were satisfied with frugal comfort and devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit – a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contest of athletic youths and the laughter of comely maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age. It would, in a word, be the home of a people living the life that God desires that man should live. (p. 466)

There is much in this passage to be admired. It would be difficult, in our own day, to imagine a politician talking about joy and laughter as authentic goals of political action. But might joy and laughter be better ways to assess the state of a nation than its gross domestic product? It is worth noting, as well, that de Valera's paradigm of the Irish citizen is not the middle-aged man or woman who typically dominates public life. It is, rather, children, youths, and old people; that is to say, on the one hand, those who have created the conditions of our present life and, on the other, those who will have to exist in the conditions that the dominant generation is shaping, in the present, as the inevitable context for the lives of those who are now still young. In other words, de Valera reminds his audience both of its debts to the past and of its responsibility for the well-being of future generations.[16] There is no one-dimensional thinking here, of a present that just continues towards an ever-receding horizon while we are trying to adjust to its inexorable trajectory. The time of de Valera's politics possesses three fully developed dimensions, which form a single dynamic.

But there is more to de Valera's political philosophy of time. The reference to God in the paragraph just quoted indicates that his St Patrick's Day address places politics in a framework that is ultimately theological. The nature of this framework becomes clearer in the immediately following sentence: 'With the tidings that make such an Ireland possible, St Patrick came to our ancestors 1,500 years ago, promising happiness here as well as happiness hereafter' (p. 466). So, then, it is the expectation of a transcendent happiness beyond the one attainable in this life which justifies the notion of a people satisfied with frugal comfort and devoted to the 'things of the spirit'. The hierarchy intimated here values the life of the spirit more highly than the life of material comfort, and orders the latter to the former. It reflects the conviction that the proper goal of this life is attainable only as the object of

a spiritual quest.

Although these are lofty thoughts, they produce practical consequences for the nature of the community – the *polis*, as the ancient Greeks would have said – in which people live. In particular, in the theo-political framework which de Valera sketches, the community is not going to seek perfection in this life. Rather, it is going to accept limitations upon the perfection of its current material existence because it is expecting a better one. The result is frugality, and frugality not reluctantly undergone but willingly embraced.

How shrewd – a cynic might object – for a politician to paint the prospect of a better life in some transcendent realm when he is incapable of producing reasonable living conditions in the here and now. This 'opium of the people' argument is not without a grain of truth, although, as we have already seen, de Valera is honest about the urgency of securing a truly humane standard of living for every citizen. Nevertheless, modern-day Ireland, along with the rest of the modern world, has rejected the theo-political move that is at the heart of de Valera's speech. It is no longer willing to give credence to promises of transcendent bliss. This rejection has produced a momentous consequence that may well be the key to understanding the fundamental thrust of contemporary politics: it has opened up the possibility of not only imagining but actively seeking perfection in this life. The 'immanentization of the eschaton' – to quote Eric Voegelin's term for the translation of otherworldly aspirations into this-worldly goals – is the intellectual foundation for the explosion of material comfort that the Western world has seen since the beginning of the industrial revolution. If I have nothing to hope for beyond this life, I had better make sure to enjoy maximum well-being in the current one! In a word, political action must strive to make heaven (or the eschaton) immanent, creating an earthly paradise. (By the way, in the pursuit of this goal, there is no daylight between communism and capitalism; only the means differ. This is the reason why social progressivism and economic liberalism complement rather than contradict each other.[17]) Furthermore, the horizon of earthly progress keeps receding since there is always more to hope for: more comfort, improved health, greater social justice, and so forth. The result is the typically modern pursuit of progress as an end in itself.[18]

At first blush, this does not sound too bad. Yet there is a downside to the rejection of the type of premodern theo-politics that de Valera advocates. We can discover it by considering some of the positive consequences that his vision produces. For, a little further into his speech, de Valera elaborates on

the right relationship between material and spiritual resources in the life of the Irish people:

> We are aware that [Young Irelander Thomas] Davis was mistaken in the extent of some of the material resources which he catalogued [he spoke of harbours, rivers, bogs, and mines], but we know, none the less, that our material resources are sufficient for a population much larger than we have at present, if we consider their use with a due appreciation of their value in a right philosophy of life. And we know also that the spiritual resources which Davis asked the nation to cultivate are inexhaustible. (p. 467)

What de Valera is discussing in these sentences corresponds to what we nowadays term 'sustainability'. The not excessively abundant material resources of the island of Ireland could support even significant population growth, he explains, as long as they are used frugally, with the understanding that material resources are of limited value in the pursuit of the life of the spirit – a life whose wealth is inexhaustible. By contrast and in more contemporary terms, Ireland does not possess the resources to support the ever-increasing contrived needs of a steadily growing population: the larger houses and cars, more abundant and elaborate foods, fancier clothes, frequent holidays abroad. Indeed, the whole earth has all but exhausted the resources that it is able to make available to an economy whose functioning is predicated upon steady growth of consumption. The environmental (and human) crisis that we are living is the price for, so to speak, taking the lid off the unrestrained pursuit of worldly happiness. In contradistinction to the destructive tendency towards unlimited consumption and growth, the politics that de Valera advocates recognises the finitude of material resources – not as something to be regretted but as a condition for a flourishing life of the spirit.

While the religious dimension of the 'dream' speech is undeniable and crucial to the logic of its argument, de Valera does not simply equate the 'things of the spirit' which are so important to his vision with the objects of religious devotion. The entire second half of his speech – delivered in 1943, as we said, when the fiftieth anniversary of the foundation of the Gaelic League occurred – is devoted to the indispensable role that the Irish language must play in the island's future:

> But many have more than is required and are free, if they choose, to devote themselves more completely to the things of the mind, and in particular those that mark us out as a distinct nation. The first of these latter is the national language. It is for us what no other language can be. It is our very own. It is more than a symbol; it is an essential part of our nationhood. It has been moulded by the thought of a hundred generations of our forebears. In it is stored the accumulated experience of a people, our people, who even before Christianity was brought to them were already cultured and living in a well-ordered society. (p. 467)

If the island's future must come out of a renewed appreciation of its past, then the vehicle for such a retrieval is the Irish language, which is the linguistic embodiment of the nation's accumulated wisdom. Even before St Patrick's arrival, de Valera submits, the Irish understood the meaning of a well-ordered society – ordered not yet towards happiness as conceived in the Christian faith, but ordered rightly all the same. In 1943, de Valera is at once hopeful about the possibility of restoring Irish as the actual language of the Irish people, and deeply concerned about the consequences of failure in this regard: 'With the language gone we could never aspire again to being more than half a nation' (p. 468).

In the present context, we cannot pursue the question of the role of the Irish language in the fate of the nation.[19] We must, rather, concentrate on the structures of thinking about the future that underpin de Valera's speech. We have seen how de Valera thinks the future both eschatologically – that is, as pointing beyond an inner-worldly horizon – and out of the past. The obvious concern arising here is, 'What kind of past?' It is not, to be sure, the past of historical research, but the past as used for purposes of political myth-making. It is a pre-modern, even pre-Christian past; yet de Valera also invokes the traditions of the Young Irelanders, the Gaelic League, and the Volunteers, with all the political complexities that these groups evoke. It would therefore be unfair, it seems to me, to accuse de Valera of espousing the vision of a future born of the univocal repetition of any one aspect – such as the Catholic one – of Ireland's complex cultural, religious, and political history. But again, these are matters pointing far beyond the horizon of this introductory essay.[20]

To round out the picture of de Valera's speech, we should briefly touch

upon one final issue. What about the monster of narrow nationalism? Does it not raise its ugly head in de Valera's emphasis on the distinctiveness of Irish culture? Tellingly, de Valera addresses this concern twice, in both the opening and the final paragraphs of (the English text of) his speech.[21] In the opening paragraph, he speaks of 'the Ireland that we believe is destined to play, by its example and its inspiration, a great part as a nation among the nations' (p. 466), while in concluding he refers to his conviction that, 'the more we preserve and develop our individuality and our characteristics as a distinct nation, the more secure will be our freedom and the more valuable our contribution to humanity when this war is over' (p. 469). Philosophically speaking, in de Valera's view, particularity does not contradict universality; humanity does not exist in the abstract but is the sum total of the world's peoples with their distinct identities. He is confident, not that Ireland's civilization is superior to all the others, but that it has a distinctive and crucial contribution to make nonetheless. Just as the country's future, even as it ultimately points to an entirely different homeland, must arise out of a retrieval of Ireland's distinctive and particular past, so Ireland cannot take its rightful place in the world if it fails to preserve the particularity of its cultural heritage.

We have now found, in de Valera's celebrated 'dream' speech, an answer to our question about how to approach the task of thinking about the future. As we have seen, de Valera's approach is ultimately rooted in a theo-politics, and more specifically a Christian eschatology. This may be abhorrent to many modern commentators, who have not failed to sense de Valera's conservatism. Yet such critics should propose a better structure of futural thinking. And so much is certain: the immanentization of the eschaton does not provide one.[22]

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Writing eighty years after de Valera's 1943 speech, Alan Titley in his contribution to this special issue takes stock of the state of the 'Celtic revival', which was so crucial to the founders of the modern Irish state. If one expected a depressing account of the shrinking of the *Gaeltachtaí* or of the unsatisfactory state of Irish-language instruction in the schools, this is not at all what Titley is offering. On the contrary, he celebrates a number of successes. Most importantly, precisely due to the teaching of Irish in the country's schools, for the first time in history ordinary Irish people – outside the privileged classes of scholars, priests, and religious – can not only speak

their national language but read and write it. And while the Gaelic League has failed in its goal to establish Irish as the standard language of the nation, Irish literature has been flourishing, as witnessed by the production of many fine poems, novels, and plays. Titley discusses contemporary Irish film at some length as well.

Music and dance indicate additional areas in which a genuine revival has occurred. Yet Titley points to the strange phenomenon that often the success of Irish cultural productions at home requires that they should first have gained fame abroad, especially in the U.S. It is as though the Irish appreciated their own cultural heritage only when it is seen through the eyes of others, and thus validated. Titley finds a further example of this trend in post-colonial theory. While academics in Ireland have eagerly embraced post-colonial theorists from other shores, they have neglected Daniel Corkery's *Hidden Ireland*, published as early as 1924 and 'one of the finest books of post-colonial theory ever written'.[23] All this is ironic, given the historic connection of revivalism with the aspiration towards independence and the recognition of the dignity of the Irish nation. Irish culture, Titley stresses, is valuable in itself, having no need to justify its value in relation to the U.S., Europe, or currently prevailing intellectual interests.

Returning to the successes of the revival, Titley notes that Irish has fared well in times of technological progress. *Raidió na Gaeltachta* and TG4 have transformed Irish into a genuine national language, overcoming the geographical and phonetic-grammatical separation of the various dialects. Indeed, thanks to the Internet, there are now communities of Irish speakers worldwide.

What, then, is the most pressing desideratum for the future of the Irish language? Titley's answer is clear: the Irish media must address their *omertà* in relation to Irish-language literature. Current coverage is utterly insufficient, failing to give the public an incentive to engage with the Irish language. As Titley writes, 'A washed-up, fading, largely-forgotten, insignificant, empty kernel of a botoxed, once-upon-a-time post-celebrity is more likely to get publicity on an RTÉ chat show than somebody who has written a stunning, or a revealing, or even just an interesting readable novel or biography in Irish.'[24] A scathing verdict.

In concluding his essay, Titley sees Irish literature as taking its rightful place among the literatures of the world. Validation by the currently dominant global culture is not required. 'Maybe', Titley declares, 'even the European

project is tired and wilting. Why not be at the cutting edge of a new global culture listening to the voices of the world? Irish literature has a unique starting point, a unique connection with the non-colonial, non-cosmopolitan, non-dominant, non-suppressing cultures of the globe.'[25]

Peadar Kirby's contribution opens with a critical examination of the notion of sustainability. Too often, the term has acquired a very thin meaning which suggests nothing more than business as usual – maximization of economic growth with some measures to buffer the worst effects of environmental degradation. This is not the kind of sustainability that Kirby wants to advocate. Interestingly (given de Valera's remarks on the critical importance of the Irish language) Kirby invokes an Irish term to illustrate the more holistic kind of sustainability that he has in mind. This term, *'inmharthanacht'*, suggests a way of living that is stable, healthy, and has continuity. The emphasis here is on stability (as opposed to relentless growth), health (understood as harmony with the natural world), and a use of natural resources that does not sacrifice the future to the present. Fortunately, in its recent documents, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has moved towards such a more robust conception of sustainability.

Kirby's article attempts an assessment of whether Ireland is moving in the right direction. Admittedly, current numbers are disappointing, placing Ireland towards the bottom in many of the categories through which sustainability is measured. Kirby speaks of the country's 'laggard status in climate action'.[26] But recent political developments are more promising. The Climate Action and Low-Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill, which passed into law in July 2021, stipulates climate action plans across all sectors of government, together with stringent monitoring mechanisms. Kirby expresses hope that this legislation could open a new path of economic development for Ireland, an alternative to the strategy of attracting multinational corporations that has dominated public policy for a long time, despite considerable risks. Along with the Circular Economy Act, the Climate Action Bill heralds a 'transformation of our society in the most fundamental ways', in Kirby's view.[27]

But challenges remain. Kirby believes that the Climate Action Plan's Just Transition Framework does not go far enough, in stipulating merely that existing social inequalities must not be 'exacerbated'; there is no ambition to promote social justice beyond this modest goal. Furthermore, it remains to be seen whether the Irish government will develop the capacity to implement the far-reaching changes that the recent legislation envisages.

In the end, Kirby argues, what is required is a genuine paradigm change – and that is predicated upon a philosophically grounded understanding of sustainability. He quotes Pope Francis, who in the encyclical *Laudato Si'* declares: 'We have to accept that technological products are not neutral, for they create a framework which ends up conditioning lifestyles and shaping social possibilities along the lines dictated by the interests of certain powerful groups. Decisions which may seem purely instrumental are in reality decisions about the kind of society we want to build.'[28] (A philosopher might hear echoes of Heidegger's essay 'The Question concerning Technology' here, although Heidegger is more reserved in relation to the power of human decision-making.) At any rate, we need an economy based on degrowth to replace the unsustainable current economic model. Once again, Kirby emphasizes the crucial role of indigenous cultures in bringing about such a paradigm change. 'In the Irish context', he writes, 'this draws attention to the worldview, sensitivity to nature, and ecological consciousness that are available through Gaelic language and culture.'[29]

What mainly distinguishes such indigenous cultures from us, Amanda Slevin argues, is that, since the industrial revolution, the modern West has been dominated by capitalism. The latter generates what she calls 'individualized, hyper-consumerist societies' whose 'anthropocentric' lifestyle leads to a dangerous alienation from nature.[30] That is the root of our problems. Once this root has been identified, however, there is hope; for capitalism and its attendant alienation are 'not a pre-determined feature of human behaviour'. As indigenous cultures demonstrate, there are alternatives.

In the light of these considerations, our way towards 'real' or 'genuine' sustainability must reject notions of sustainability that have been 'co-opted' by capitalism to mean 'preoccupation with ever-growing profits, despite ecological limits'.[31] Moreover, we need to recognise the 'inter-relationship between environmental considerations and wider questions of social inequality and social justice'.[32] In particular, the hyper-consumption of the Global North and the environmental havoc that it causes are at the expense of the Global South.

Practically speaking, the way forward, Slevin argues, is community action. For community represents the 'critical interface between structure and agency',[33] that is to say, the answer to the question as to how individuals can regain agency from within seemingly monolithic social and economic structures. However, writing as she is from Northern Ireland, Slevin is

well aware that communities can themselves be problematic, the cause of division and social alienation rather than the solution to these problems. Slevin therefore adopts the term 'community of communities' to designate the manner in which joint climate action has the potential of bringing different communities together in the pursuit of a common goal. She cites Climate Coalition Northern Ireland as one example of such a 'community of communities' in which a 'socio-eco-logical imagination'[34] can be fostered that allows people to learn about the need to live in harmony with each other, and with the natural environment, at both local and global levels. Towards the end of her contribution, Slevin invokes Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to explain the mechanisms of revolutionary transformations through community action. Central to Freire's thinking in this regard is the notion of *conscientização,* or 'conscientization', which leads from a critical awareness of oppressive structural forces to collective action aimed at change.

Johnny Gogan's contribution offers a community-based perspective on many of the issues explored in a more theoretical manner in Slevin's article. He tells the story of the community response to the prospect of exploration for oil and gas through fracking in counties Leitrim and Fermanagh. Several of Gogan's points deserve careful consideration. First of all, community-based protests sustained over two years succeeded against the commercial interests of a foreign industry giant and, indeed, against a government decision to grant exploration licences. This outcome confirms the possibility of agency in the face of environmental degradation: we can actually do something to influence the course of events, right in our own communities and without waiting for government bodies to wake up. Secondly, artistic production has the potential to facilitate effective community action. A documentary such as *Gasland* can be more powerful in eliciting agency than the study of scientific data – not to mention the fact that a carefully produced film can be ahead of science in documenting the effects of a controversial industrial practice like fracking. Thirdly, the community initiative in which Gogan was active, Love Leitrim, campaigned by highlighting everything that is 'lovable' about Leitrim and at risk of being lost by the introduction of heavy industry into the rural environment. Thus, Love Leitrim campaigned 'for' something worth preserving – the way of life of the communities it represented – rather than 'against' a big foreign corporation and government. Likewise, the campaign invited politicians to be involved rather than merely engaging in damaging and divisive criticism.

A fourth point worth emphasizing is the potential of grassroots initiatives to advance cross-border cooperation. After the success of Love Leitrim in bringing about a moratorium on fracking in the Republic of Ireland, the exploration firm turned to the North, to Fermanagh, hoping to advance its plans there, but the expertise already gained by the southern campaign assisted communities north of the border in acting decisively as well. The cooperation, Gogan writes, helped alleviate 'lingering post-ceasefire communal tensions in Fermanagh'.[35]

In a final section of his paper, Gogan turns to the question of how community-based initiatives could be 'scaled up' to play a role in the response to climate change. Again, he argues in favour of a bottom-up rather than a top-down approach, in the sense that 'sporting organizations, school communities, trade unions, and farming organizations' could take the initiative in promoting sustainable practices, instead of waiting for government to enact laws and regulations.[36] That is the most effective way to 'regenerate the state', as Gogan says in his title, for 'the state' is us.

And this does not mean that good political leadership is not needed as well. Intriguingly, Gogan turns back to the first years of the Free State, when the new Irish government launched the Shannon Scheme as a crucial step towards energy independence. This audacious, cutting-edge project brought about the transition from energy generation that was based exclusively upon the importation of coal to an indigenous and sustainable energy supply. This is the route, Gogan suggests, which Ireland needs to take again in the current situation, by taking advantage of the country's potential to produce large amounts of sustainable wind power.

With Jane Fountain's contribution, the special issue turns towards another challenge that featured prominently in the RIA seminars: the effects of the digital revolution on every area of public and private life. Fountain sees the modern state confronted with a stark alternative: it can use data and algorithms either to enhance democratic processes or to develop into the all-controlling, fear-inspiring Leviathan that Hobbes imagined. The pursuit of the former goal requires being clear-eyed about the challenges that digitalization poses to core democratic values such as equal treatment of, and opportunities for, all citizens. Fountain focuses on one area in particular: inequalities that are 'embedded in data', as she says, despite the fact that data can appear like neutral and objective tools of decision-making. This is not so at all, Fountain submits.

She examines three examples of injustices that are liable to arise when government bodies use AI-based tools in discharging their functions. The first such example is predictive policing, a practice in which computer programmes are employed to predict geographical areas that require a larger police presence than average. The main problem here is a vicious feedback loop: once an area becomes subject to more intense policing, more crime is going to be discovered there than elsewhere. This subsequently leads to more intense policing … and so forth. The same practice is even more troubling when it is applied to individuals. Once a person has been algorithmically determined to be at greater risk of falling afoul of the law, this individual will not only be subject to greater police attention, but may be affected by disadvantages in other areas as well because of data-sharing among government bodies.

Healthcare is another area where increased use of data-based decision-making carries the risk of bias. As an example, Fountain cites a type of software widely used in the American healthcare industry to predict a patient's need for 'high-risk care management'. According to the results generated by this algorithm, Black people in the United States are generally in worse health than White people. This notion, however, could arise only because the computer-based models conflate healthcare costs with actual illness. Once this distinction is taken into account, along with patterns of healthcare use which vary between Black and White populations, the results look very different. This is an example of systemic racism – racism not due to the ignorance or ill-will of particular individuals, but rather to a failure in AI-assisted systems of decision-making to take into consideration all the factors, and the right factors, which affect the health (or other characteristics) of a diverse population. But there may be more fundamental limitations as well in the use of AI-based mechanisms for administrative decision-making. Fountain sounds this note of caution:

> Researchers should be clear […] that fair, equitable algorithms are insufficient to address complex, deeply engrained social problems such as systemic racism that are, by definition, dynamic and unstructured. Algorithms constitute powerful tools for knowledge generation and decision support, but they do not address the root causes of social and economic problems.[37]

Facial recognition is the final issue that Fountain addresses in her article. Again, the algorithms underlying facial-recognition applications do not produce equally reliable results across all population groups. These defects can create serious injustices – in cases, for example, where police combine public surveillance cameras with real-time facial-recognition software that compares captured images with faces on a list of wanted individuals. Here, erroneous identifications can lead to false arrests and investigations of innocent people. In the most extreme circumstances, and in certain American jurisdictions, incorrect identification of the face of a criminal could even lead to a death sentence being handed to an innocent person.

Despite these serious problems, Fountain remains optimistic. The key in not letting all-pervasive digitalization overwhelm the democratic state is the realization that what is required, in the end, is more than technical expertise: it is informed human judgement alone that can steer 'the decisions to be made regarding democratic rights and obligations' in the right direction.[38] Rather than abdicating their responsibilities, in the mistaken belief that computer-driven decision-making is not only more efficient but also more objective than fallible human judgement, state agents must critically examine and, where necessary, correct the influence of AI-based applications on government functions.

One way of exercising oversight over the digitalization of all areas of life is, of course, the law. We are all aware, for example, of the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which is meant to give individual citizens some measure of control over the data that government agencies and corporations gather about them. However, the EU has developed a body of law in this area that goes far beyond the GDPR. Orla Lynskey in her contribution provides an overview of the various legal initiatives. Since 2016, when the GDPR was enacted, the EU has developed a Digital Single Market Strategy, a strategy on 'Shaping Europe's Digital Future', a European Digital Compass, a Digital Services Act, a Digital Markets Act, an Artificial Intelligence Act, and a Data Governance Act. These Acts come with 'a raft of new enforcement mechanisms and authorities';[39] however, as Lynskey notes, enforcement remains the weak point of all the EU legislation. Insufficient attention has been paid to the many challenges that enforcement of data regulations poses: data are gathered across national boundaries and across different sectors, in ways that can be difficult to grasp and that keep evolving due to rapid technological development, and by extremely large and

economically powerful corporations. Amassing ever new legislation does not help if enforcement of this legislation falls short.

In order to illustrate her point, Lynskey focuses on the enforcement of the GDPR itself, which remains the cornerstone of the EU's legislative efforts in this domain. Since Ireland hosts the European headquarters of many of the most influential technology companies, the Irish Data Protection Commission plays a key role in ensuring adherence to the standards set out by the GDPR. Yet the efforts of the Irish Data Protection Commission are often criticized as falling short. Indeed, in its own annual report for 2021, the DPC throws up its hands in despair at the enforcement task that it is facing: 'Whilst the volume of work being completed by the office is ever-intensifying, what has remained elusive in 2021 is any agreed standard by which to measure the impacts and success or otherwise of a regulatory intervention in the form of GDPR that applies to literally everything.'[40]

Lynskey argues that four fundamental ambiguities need to be resolved in order to render enforcement of the GPDR effective and meaningful.

First, the relationship between individual citizens' complaints and the role of the so-called 'national supervisory authorities' has to be clarified. Do the NSAs have to investigate each complaint brought by a citizen? While some scholars argue this to be the case, many NSAs, including the Irish Data Protection Commission, have practised a more selective approach, focusing on more significant breaches of the GDPR in order not to dissipate their efforts in attempting to follow up on every single case. Such prioritization could be justifiable as long as the NSAs follow clearly established guidelines governing the way in which they select what to investigate. This picture is, however, complicated by the fact that the GDPR gives individual citizens legal recourse against NSAs if they do not pursue reported breaches.

A second ambiguity which hinders the effective implementation of the GDPR concerns the nature of the actions that NSAs take when they discover a violation of the GDPR's statutes. To take the Irish Data Protection Commission as an example again, this NSA typically prefers 'engagement' with an offending party to the imposition of large fines. Some scholars would argue, however, that this approach is softer than what the GDPR envisages. Indeed, the GDPR foresees situations in which NSAs will pronounce outright bans on data-gathering practices that violate the GDPR in significant ways; yet such bans are rare – or, as Lynskey writes, 'evidence to date suggests that this power has been relatively under-utilized compared to other corrective

powers'.[41]

Thirdly, for effective enforcement of the GDPR there needs to be clarity in relation to its goal: in protecting citizens' control over their data, does the GDPR aim at the prevention of wrongs or of harms? Any violation of the provisions of the GDPR is by definition a wrong, but some courts in EU members states have come to the conclusion that not every violation of complainants' rights entitles them automatically to compensation for non-material damages. Perhaps – it has been suggested – the harm caused has to reach a level of seriousness that goes beyond mere inconvenience. But how can such a level be quantified? It is also not clear how rights can be protected if their violation goes unsanctioned in some or even many cases.

The fourth ambiguity to which Lynskey calls attention has to do with the potential for particular violations of the GDPR to be sanctioned in a number of different ways: through either private litigation or public enforcement, by a single national supervisory authority or in a multi-national collaborative effort, as a matter of privacy law or as also affecting other legal areas, such as consumer or competition law. No clear guidance has emerged in any of these respects, creating inconsistencies that hamper effective implementation of the GDPR.

Towards the end of her paper, Lynskey cannot help remarking: 'one is not left with the sense of a comprehensive vision for the EU digital society. In any such vision', she continues, 'founded on both maintaining high protection of fundamental rights and the economic exploitation of data and digital technologies, an acknowledgment must be made that conflicts between economic priorities and fundamental rights protections may arise.'[42] Without such an acknowledgment, followed by an attempt at principled solution, these conflicts will manifest themselves at the level of enforcement. Our author puts it bluntly: if the relationship between citizens' rights and economic interests is not clarified, one ends up with 'unenforceable paper laws'.[43]

* * *

At the end of this summary of the contributions to our special issue of *Studies*, what is the picture that emerges of current thinking regarding Ireland's future? First of all, a word of caution and modesty is in order. The Royal Irish Academy's 'Ireland 2030' seminars were sponsored by only two of the Academy's multidisciplinary committees; there were, for example, no scientists involved and no economists, so that their concerns and priorities

are not reflected in this collection of articles. It would have been extremely interesting, for instance, to hear economists' views about the compatibility of capitalism with a holistically conceived form of sustainability, or to consider what scientists think about the possibility of unlimited progress – leading even to the divinization of humanity as envisaged by the likes of Yuval Harari, author of the best-selling *Homo Deus*.

Yet even if this special issue is by no means comprehensive in its scope, the insights it conveys are important and useful. If we return to our initial theme regarding the possibility of human agency in the face of ever-accelerating change, one lesson that has emerged from this collection of articles is that the task of creating a truly just and sustainable society has more room for 'bottom-up' agency than the challenges of digitalization and AI-based decision-making. Robust legislation, coupled with clearly defined mechanisms of enforcement, seems to be the only way to protect citizens' privacy; for there is no way for individuals living more or less normal lives[44] to avoid disclosing personal data to corporations and government agencies. Likewise, while individual judgement is necessary to correct the pitfalls of AI-assisted decision-making, it is the institutions employing such tools which are ultimately responsible for their oversight.

What is the role of the Irish language and culture in all this? Again, it has become clear from the contributions in this special issue of *Studies* that locally rooted action is crucial to bringing about a paradigm shift in how we understand sustainability. The Irish language is a precious tool in such rethinking, in that it allows its users to reconnect with older ways of conceptualizing community, and the relationships between human communities and what we now call the 'environment'. Indeed, in Irish the simple everyday greeting *Dia dhuit* – along with its response, *Dia is Muire dhuit* – immediately relates the speakers not only to each other, but to the transcendent. Within such a worldview, the immanentization of the eschaton is simply not thinkable.

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Notes

1 One might ask whether even Project Ireland 2040 truly represents a principled reflection on the future or merely an ad hoc response to the most pressing concerns of the day. The website for Project Ireland 2040 defines the Project's goals in the following terms: 'The aim of Project Ireland 2040 is to construct an improved Ireland for all of us. By 2040, there will be approximately one million additional people living here in Ireland. This population growth will require hundreds of thousands of new jobs, new homes, heightened cultural and social amenities, enhanced regional connectivity and improved environmental sustainability. Project Ireland 2040 sets out to deliver these' (https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/09022006-project-ireland-2040/; last accessed 2/11/2022).

2 Recordings of the four seminars are available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sIPPA86vgEY&list=PLD_4i6suzwGX34ikrzABPnskki9E56xDA (last accessed 26/12/2022).

3 In *The Transformation of Ireland, 1900–2000* (London: Profile Books, 2004), Diarmaid Ferriter calls the speech '[o]ne of the most famous broadcasts of the century' (p. 4).

4 Tom Garvin, *Preventing the Future: Why Was Ireland So Poor for So Long?* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2004).

5 J. J. Lee, 'A Sense of Self in the Celtic Tiger', in *Are We Forgetting Something? Our Society in the New Millennium*, ed. by Harry Bohan and Gerard Kennedy (Dublin: Veritas, 1999), pp. 71–94 (p. 71).

6 See note 10 below.

7 Garvin, *Preventing the Future*, p. 36.

8 Ibid.

9 Even earlier, in 1999, the title of a conference asked, *Are We Forgetting Something?* (see note 5 above). The piece by Professor Joe Lee cited in that note offers an earlier reappraisal of de Valera's celebrated speech.

10 The text of the speech, as based on the typescript, is published in *Speeches and Statements by Éamon de Valera, 1917–73*, ed. by Maurice Moynihan (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan; New York: St Martin's Press, 1980), pp. 466–69 (no. 89). The wording of speech recorded by RTÉ occasionally differs slightly from the typescript. The best-known instance of such a departure is that de Valera replaced the phrase 'comely maidens' from the typescript (p. 466) with 'happy maidens' when he delivered the text. One can listen to a short excerpt at https://www.rte.ie/archives/exhibitions/eamon-de-valera/719124-address-by-mr-de-valera/ (last accessed 2/11/2022).

11 For the tradition of Irish revivalism, see the excellent study by Fionntán de Brún, *Revivalism and Modern Irish Literature: The Anxiety of Transmission and the Dynamics of Renewal* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2019).

12 See R. F. Foster, *Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland, 1890–1923* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2015).

13 The page numbers in parentheses refer to the collection of de Valera's speeches cited in note 10 above.

14 John P. O'Carroll comments incisively on de Valera's use of myth-making as a tool of charismatic leadership in his essay, 'Éamon de Valera, Charisma, and Political Development', in *De Valera and His Times*, ed. by John P. O'Carroll and John A. Murphy (Cork: Cork University Press, 1983), pp. 17–34. In the same volume, the contribution by Gearóid Ó Crualaoich argues along similar lines, diagnosing a 'folk ideology' in de Valera.

15 As noted by Michele Dowling, 'The Ireland That I Would Have: De Valera and the Creation of an Irish National Image', in *History Ireland*, 5:2 (Summer 1997), 37–41. Dowling interprets the 'dream' speech in the context of other speeches made by the de Valera in the 1930s and 1940s.

16 As J. J. Lee put it, '[d]e Valera's model emphasised the essential links between the generations as he identified his ideal for the dependent ages in society – childhood, youth and old age' (Lee, 'A Sense of Place in the Celtic Tiger', p. 74).

17 This complementarity is in evidence in the contemporary 'zombie' university – a topic on which one may wish to read Sinéad Murphy, *Zombie University: Thinking under Control* (London: Repeater Books, 2017).

18 I have explored this immanentization of the eschaton in a previous article for this journal: 'How Did We Get Here? Reflections towards a Philosophy of the Present', in *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, vol. 110, no. 439 (Autumn 2021), 279–91.

19 For some recent reflections on the relationship between language and national identity, in the Irish

context, see Caoimhín De Barra, *Gaelige: A Radical Revolution* (Dublin: Currach Press, 2019). Also see John Walsh, *One Hundred Years of Irish Language Policy, 1922–2022* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2022), and the important review by Peadar Kirby in *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, vol. 111, no. 443 (Autumn 2022), 310-19.

20 And, I should add, addressed by far more qualified scholars than the present writer, such as Diarmaid Ferriter in his book, *Judging Dev: A Reassessment of the Life and Legacy of Éamon de Valera* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2007).

21 I am saying 'the English text' because the speech is framed by an opening and a closing paragraph in Irish.

22 I would like to thank my colleague Fionntán de Brún, Professor of Modern Irish at Maynooth University, for critical feedback on my interpretation of de Valera's speech. The views expressed here are of course only my own.

23 Titley, 'Irish, "Celtic", and the Future', p. 35 in this issue.

24 Ibid., p. 40.

25 Ibid., p. 41.

26 Peadar Kirby, 'Living Lightly on our Planet: Challenges for Ireland', p. 47 below.

27 Ibid., p. 49.

28 Quoted ibid, p. 54.

29 Ibid., p. 56.

30 Amanda Slevin, 'Climate, Communities, and Capitalism: Critically Imagining and Co-Creating Pathways for a Sustainable Ireland', p. 67 below.

31 Ibid., p. 72.

32 Ibid., p. 72, citing Caitlin Cahill.

33 Ibid., p. 62.

34 Ibid., p. 62.

35 Johnny Gogan, 'Regenerating the State – the Key to Ireland's Response to Climate Change', p. 89 in this issue.

36 Ibid., p. 90.

37 Jane Fountain, 'The Algorithmic State? Challenges to Democracy in an Era of Digitalization', p. 98

38 Ibid., p. 101.

39 Orla Lynskey, 'Regulating for the Future: The Law's Enforcement Deficit', p. 107 in this issue.

40 Quoted ibid., p. 108.

41 Ibid., p. 111.

42 Ibid., p. 116.

43 Ibid., p. 116.

44 What I mean here is people who are not willing or able to renounce modern life altogether – like the Amish, for instance.

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