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The New Scholarship: Celebrating the ‘I’ in Ideas

Robert Baldwin *

Abstract: The New Scholarship has emerged as an influential style of scholarly writing. Its proponents rely, in the main, on three devices to add impact to their messages. These are *self-reference*, *authority*, and *celebration*. *Self-references* link discussions to the lives of the involved authors, *authority* lends force to contentions by emphasising the status of the writer, and *celebration* enhances the relevant message by emphasising the excitement involved in producing an important publication. The New Scholars may be seen by some as prone to excessive discursiveness and self-promotion, but the upside of the style is that it can reveal useful information about an author, and it contextualises the arguments being presented. What is clear is that the New Scholars enjoy considerable market success, political influence, and, increasingly, recognition in the academic world.

INTRODUCTION

The burgeoning of the New Journalism in the 1960s and 1970s marked a new approach to reportage. Writers such as Tom Wolfe and Hunter S. Thompson brought a more memoir-based, novelistic, treatment in which the writer’s own experiences and perspectives were as much the object of scrutiny as the events reported on.¹ Gone was the search for dispassionate objectivism; replacing it was a focus on the reporter’s participation in affairs and on their own life and opinions.

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¹ See, for example, T. Woolfe (ed), *The New Journalism* (London: Picador, 1975); *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (New York: Farrar, 1968); *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* (New York: Farrar, 1965); H.S.

The New Journalism brought an exciting new angle and huge publishing success to its proponents. It was a development that scholarly writing was apparently slow to follow. A closer look reveals, however, that the roots of the 'New Scholarship' can be traced back to the early philosophers and that it is alive and well today, particularly in the USA, with authors such as Dan Ariely, Cass Sunstein, and Richard Thaler. It is characterised by a number of features that carry echoes of the New Journalism – notably its autobiographical and memorial elements, which are designed to add force to the accounts being offered and the ideas presented.

This article looks at the techniques of the New Scholarship, and it argues that the particular force of this approach can be explained by highlighting its use of a number of three identifiable devices: *self-reference*, *authority*, and *celebration*. The effects of these devices are considered, potential criticisms of the New Scholarship are examined, and conclusions are drawn on the value of the New Scholarship style.

SELF-REFERENCE: WELCOME TO MY WORLD

The New Scholarship sees academic work as woven into the fabric of life. It recognises that the average reader will find ideas the more attractive as they are linked to the lives of the authors that generate them. It is that grounding and contextualising that adds substantial conviction to the theses being argued for. A linkage to everyday life also offers the reader the attractive reassurance that an academic writer, even one of huge eminence, is, like them, of this world. This has long been the case. It was so when philosophers first read Descartes' *Discourse* and were drawn in by the vision of the great Frenchman settling down next to the roaring stove in order to contemplate the nature of existence. It is similarly so in modern times. When a New Scholar gives information of a domestic nature, this is designed to draw the reader into the author's positioning in the world. Thus, in Thaler and Sunstein's 2008 book, *Nudge*,² the authors make a point about the value of phrasing a public health notice in a particular way. Their account commences:³

A while back Sunstein took his teenage daughter to Lollapalooza, the three day rock festival held every year in Chicago, Illinois. On Friday night a huge sign, with changing electronic messages, often showed the schedule of

Thompson, *Hells Angels* (London: Penguin, 1966); *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (Toronto: Random House, 1971); *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1973); T. Capote, *In Cold Blood* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1965).

² R. Thaler and C. Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth and Happiness* (London: Penguin, 2008).

³ *ibid*, 243.

performances, but interspersed with that information with a message saying, 'DRINK MORE WATER'[...]

The authors' argument, at this stage of their book, is that such a 'nudge' was helpful to festival goers and that the instructive words were well chosen – and better than, say, 'DRINK WATER'. Thaler and Sunstein's drafting, however, offers a much more valuable message – it lets the reader know that Sunstein may be of the scholarly elite, but he is also a vulnerable human and a father (a pretty cool one at that). This information lets the reader into his world and makes his argument both more attractive and more accessible. The message is, indeed, reinforced a few lines later when the authors add:

As it happens, Sunstein wished he had seen the sign earlier; he became very thirsty during the performance of the band Death Cab for Cutie, but the crowd was so densely packed that it was impossible to go out to find water.

Thaler and Sunstein, to be sure, are scholars whose message is all the more accessible because of their secure empirical groundings and normal appetites – a point reinforced on discussing a line drawing that creates an optical illusion: 'When Thaler showed this example to Sunstein at their usual lunch haunt, Sunstein grabbed his chopstick to check.'

A further aspect of self-referencing is the New Scholarship tenet that real-life examples, and preferably autobiographical ones, pack far more of a punch than hypothetical or third-party illustrations. They reveal endearing information about the author, they are memorable, and they give conviction to an analysis. For this reason, New Scholars are reluctant to cheat their readers of details about their lives. This, they hold, is the colour that adds lustre to their ideas and theories. When, for example, Tom Peters and Robert H. Waterman start *In Search of Excellence*⁴ – their well-known book about the lessons to be learned from America's best-run companies – they begin with a point about quality of service:

We had decided, after dinner, to spend a second night in Washington. Our business day had taken us beyond the last convenient flight out. We had no hotel reservations, but we were near the new Four Seasons, had stayed there before, and liked it. As we walked through the lobby wondering how best to plead our case for a room, we braced for the usual chilly shoulder accorded to latecomers. To our astonishment the concierge looked up, smiled, called us by name, and asked how we were. She knew our names!

In similar vein, Dan Ariely, Professor of Behavioral Economics at Duke University, commences his bestselling book *The Upside of Irrationality*⁵ with some

⁴ T. Peters and R. Waterman, *In Search of Excellence* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982), xv.

⁵ D. Ariely, *The Upside of Irrationality* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010).

autobiographical material by way of example. He is making the point that we often procrastinate because we prefer short-term gratification to long-term objectives. Rather than describe the behaviour of a third party, or persons in general, he starts his argument in best New Scholarship style:

Many years ago I experienced a devastating accident. A large magnesium flare exploded next to me and left 70 percent of my body covered in third degree burns [...] As if to add insult to injury, I acquired hepatitis from an infected blood transfusion after three weeks in the hospital [...] The disease increased the risk of complications, delayed my treatment, and caused my body to reject many skin transplants. To make matters worse [...]

The Ariely account is then sustained for a further three pages of blood tests, vomiting, and self-injection procedures, before the message about procrastination is delivered. It is not remarkable that a New Scholar should share this amount of personal medical detail in order to exemplify a point – that is par for the course. What is noteworthy is that Ariely's New Scholarship leads him to offer his readers a reprise of the narrative in question. He notes in *The Upside of Irrationality*⁶ that he has already given a (longer) description of his magnesium accident and follow-up treatment in his earlier bestseller *Predictably Irrational*.⁷

Self-references that involve episodes from to the New Scholar's childhood can be seen as particularly powerful. Thus, Nicholas Negroponte, Professor of Media Technology at MIT, started his 1995 bestseller *Being Digital* with a point about the ways in which information transfers were changing 'from atoms to bits':⁸

As a child I read train timetables instead of the classics, and delighted in making imaginary perfect connections from one obscure town in Europe to another. This fascination gave me an excellent grasp of European geography. Thirty years later, as Director of the MIT's Media Lab [...] I was summoned to two industry-government meetings [...] at both meetings, Evian water was served in one-liter glass bottles. Unlike most of the participants, I knew where Evian was from my timetables [...]

Professor Negroponte's argument emerges after some time: moving data in hard form is as sensible as transporting heavy bottles of Evian water across thousands of miles – and it is inexorably giving way to the transfer of electronic data at the speed of light.

The New Scholars, it can be seen, tend to avoid hasty, concise, or impersonal expressions of their arguments. Typical, again, is Sunstein and Thaler's explanation

⁶ *ibid*, 1.

⁷ D. Ariely, *Predictably Irrational* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), xii-xvii.

⁸ N. Negroponte, *Being Digital* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 1.

of the ‘status quo bias’ in *Nudge*. The two authors do not settle for a succinct formulation of their point (that: ‘people have a more general tendency to stick with their current situation’⁹); they add self-referencing colour:

Many years ago American Express wrote Sunstein a cheerful letter telling him that he could receive, for free, three month subscriptions to five magazines of his choice. Free subscriptions seem like a bargain, even if the magazines rarely get read, so Sunstein happily made his choices. What he didn’t realise was that unless he took some action to cancel his subscription, he would continue to receive the magazines, paying for them at the normal rate. For about a decade, he has continued to subscribe to magazines that he hardly ever reads. (He keeps intending to cancel those subscriptions, but somehow never gets round to it [...])

In a balanced double act, Richard Thaler becomes the featured author a few pages later when an example of temptation is needed:

Many years ago, Thaler was hosting dinner for some guests (other than young economists) and put out a large bowl of cashew nuts to nibble on with the first bottle of wine. Within a few minutes it became clear that the bowl of nuts was going to be consumed in its entirety, and that the guests might lack sufficient appetite to enjoy all the food that was to follow. Leaping into action, Thaler grabbed the bowl of nuts, and (while sneaking a few more nuts for himself) removed the bowl to the kitchen where it was put out of sight.

Here we see all the intensity that typifies the New Scholarship – the golden days, the youthful economists, the scholar as amateur but gifted chef, the sneaking of extra nuts *en route* for the kitchen – the scene is as memorable and as powerful as that of Descartes beside the stove.

AUTHORITY: THE FORCE BEHIND THE IDEA

Within the New Scholarship, the force of an idea or theory is textured. It derives, in some respects, from its coherence and explanatory value. In other regards, however, it derives power from its source. One aspect of this, as noted, is the grounding of the argument in life. Another is the authority and expertise of the writer. This is natural: the idea that a certain pill will help to restore the sick patient has far more power when put forward by the hospital consultant than if voiced by the person servicing the water cooler.

⁹ *ibid*, 37.

Exponents of the New Scholarship will, therefore, add texture to their work by reminding the reader that they are a person whose views carry authority. This can be done subtly but effectively. One route lies in hinting at institutional affiliations where these are sufficiently impressive. Thus, in his 2008 book, *The Character of Harms*, Malcolm Sparrow recounts how he tends to demonstrate a certain point: 'I start drawing various charts and graphs on the blackboard (yes, Harvard still has blackboards) [...]'

In a deft stroke, the reader is reminded that the institutional source of the given thesis is impeccable and that Sparrow's message has the scent of 'old money'. References to classrooms, moreover, tap into a second New Scholarship mode of establishing authority. Here the writer lets the reader know that the latter is in the same position as the author's pupils and that, like them, they will be lead enthusiastically through the maze by their teacher. Thus, Chapter 5 of the *Character of Harms* offers an extended account of Malcolm Sparrow's method of teaching executives, and this allows him to give a strong indication of both their enthusiasm and his contribution to their understandings – encapsulated in such reports as: 'At this point in the discussion I offer the class – now thoroughly engaged in the challenge [...] – some help.'

An account of the drama involved in teaching a point is held by the New Scholarship to offer a far more forceful and authoritative message than simply making the point directly to the reader. It may take longer, but it adds weight. Thus, Tom Peters does not settle for simply introducing the case against bureaucratic management; he recounts:

In December 1986, I gave a speech to young graduates of the US Navy's Civil Engineer Corps Officers School. The centrepiece was a list of ten suggestions. At the top: "I beg each and every one of you to develop a passionate and public hatred for bureaucracy." I meant it.¹⁰

Authority also derives from the intellectual power of the author. It would, however, be indelicate for New Scholars to state openly that their arguments carry weight because they are super-smart or because they have won a Nobel Prize. The texturing message can be delivered more sensitively. One way to do this is to assure the reader that the author associates with scholars who are in the top academic drawer. Here the 'Acknowledgements' pages of a book can prove invaluable and thanking a few Nobel laureate friends for their help – or, better still, their enthusiastic encouragement in bringing the book's ideas to the public – is an entrenched New Scholarship device.¹¹

¹⁰ T. Peters, *Thriving on Chaos* (New York: Kopf, 1989), 459.

¹¹ On name-dropping in acknowledgements as a device that serves, *inter alia*, to place oneself at the centre of conversations, see E. Ben-Ari, 'On Acknowledgements in Ethnographies' (1987) 43 *Journal of Anthropological Research* 63, esp. 66-67.

Authority is also reinforced by the self-referencing strategies that were discussed in the preceding section. When a New Scholar sprinkles his or her argument with autobiographical references to restaurants, medical treatments, and family events, they appear at one level to be drawing the reader into a cosy and sharing relationship. At another level, however, they are sending out a clear signal of authority. They are stating that they are confident that readers will be interested in these (on the face of it trivial) matters because the New Scholar is secure in his or her status as something of a celebrity. As with the corporate boss at the office party who regales the assembled staff with a detailed account of his or her own life, the message is clear: I can expect you to welcome this material because I am who I am. I have authority, and so I know that you will have to be interested in my life and opinions. The more trivial and personal the information conveyed, the stronger is the signalling of authority.

CELEBRATION: THE IMMEDIACY OF SCHOLARSHIP

Ideas and theories do not carry extra weight merely because they are grounded in self-reference or come from authoritative and brilliant sources. An additional factor is the vibrancy with which new ideas are developed. Like the audience that is animated by the rabble-rousing speech, a reader will be receptive to the New Scholar's arguments when infected by the excitement of their generation. Again there are reflections of the New Journalism in this celebration of sensation and the immediacy of experience. When Hunter S. Thompson wrote of his escapades with the Hell's Angels, the reader could delight in the author's adrenalin-fuelled fear. This was writing from the white heat, not some traditional hack's dull report.

With the New Scholarship there is, similarly, the added dimension – the tension and excitement of being involved in the production of a new and major contribution to the literature. This is not a matter to be silent about. It is a process to be celebrated like the birth of a new child, and the writing of a New Scholar's book or article is an *event* to be shared. Thus, Thaler comments on *Nudge*:

While working on this book, Thaler sent an email to his economist friend Hal Varian, who is affiliated with Google. Thaler intended to attach a draft of the introduction to give Hal a sense of what the book was about, but forgot the attachment. When Hal wrote back to ask for the missing attachment he noted with pride that Google was experimenting with a new feature on its email program "gmail" that would solve this problem. A user who mentions the word attachment but does not include one would be prompted [...] Thaler sent the attachment along and told Hal that this was exactly what the book was about.

The pleasure that a New Scholar derives from generating a significant piece of writing, and the degree to which the reader can share in the author's emotional experience, are encapsulated by New York University Professor of Risk Engineering, Nassim Nicholas Taleb, in *The Black Swan*.¹²

I derived an unexpected amount of enjoyment writing this book – in fact it just wrote itself – and I hope the reader will experience the same. I confess that I got hooked on this withdrawal into pure ideas after the constraints of an active and transactional life. After this book is published, my aim is to spend time away from the clutter of public activities in order to think about my philosophical-scientific idea in total tranquillity.

The conception of a book or idea is an especially poignant moment, and one that the New Scholar will, again, want to share – as when Tom Peters writes in *Thriving on Chaos*.¹³

Some months ago, after a marketing conference, I did some scribbling on a napkin while flying home. I listed the major activities of a business. Then I listed the way it “was/is” and the way it “must become” as column headings. To my dismay, in all ten basic areas, almost a 180 degree flip-flop was required. I called my sketch “a world upside down”. This list provided a major spur to the writing of this book.

Other New Scholars have gone beyond accounts of conception and treated readers to a more complete celebration of the intellectual progress that has underpinned their work. Professor Richard Susskind of Strathclyde University has exemplified this approach and, in doing so, has shown that British reserve does not always stand in the way of the New Scholarship.¹⁴

The journey began in 1981 while I was studying law as an undergraduate at Glasgow University [...] I elected to write a dissertation in place of one of my final examinations and chose computers and the law as the subject matter. With the help of a friendly librarian in the law library, I set about finding everything that had been written on the subject in the English language [...] The research librarian found twenty-six publications in all and I ordered the lot [...] I had to use a service known as “inter-library loan”. In the end my dissertation was entitled “Computers and the Judicial Process”. I have it before me as I write this chapter. The final text and two “carbon copies” were produced by my mother using a manual typewriter and transcribed from

¹² N. Taleb, *The Black Swan* (New York: Random House, 2007), xxxiii.

¹³ T. Peters, n 10 above, 40.

¹⁴ See R. Susskind, *The End of Lawyers?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 12-15.

various long-hand drafts by me. The large fonts on the front cover were created using a sticky kind of transfer known as “Letraset”.

Susskind continues his personal story for a number of pages in order to share, *inter alia*, the period of his research at Balliol College Oxford, the production of his PhD thesis, its revision for publication as a first book,¹⁵ and the development of his views about the future of lawyering. By the end of his narrative, the reader feels as though they have intellectually back-packed around more than one hemisphere with the author.

A further aspect of celebration occurs when a New Scholarship author allows the reader an insight into the success of a piece of writing. Knowing that a book or article is hugely influential offers the reader more reassurance – this time that they are not wasting their time reading this author or this publication. The strategy is reflected in Peters and Waterman’s introductory ‘Authors’ Note’ to the 2004 edition of *In Search of Excellence*: ‘As we look back on the two decades since the publication of *Excellence*, our main feeling is delight. Delight that so many people embraced the book. Delight in that we think we mainly got it right.’

A New Scholar’s celebration of success can be all the more intense when his or her judgement is seen to prevail over the critics – or even editors. As Nassim Nicholas Taleb reports:

Almost all the book editors who read the draft recommended changes at the sentence level (to make my style “better”) and in the structure of the text [...] I ignored almost all of them and found out that none of the readers thought them necessary- as a matter of fact, I find that injecting the personality of the author (imperfections included) enlivens the text. More than a hundred thousand readers later I am discovering that books are not written for book editors.¹⁶

Celebration can, moreover, be combined with authority enhancement as is shown by Peters and Waterman, in Chapter 1 of *In Search of Excellence*, when they discuss their ‘7-S Framework’ for identifying the elements of managerial success:

Anthony Athos at the Harvard Business School gave us the courage to do it that way [...] The framework, which some of our waggish colleagues have come to call the happy atom, seems to have caught on around the world as a useful way to think about organizing [...] Harvey Wagner, a friend at the University of North Carolina and an eminent scholar in the hard-nosed field of decision science, uses the model to teach business policy. He said recently,

¹⁵ *Expert Systems in Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

¹⁶ N. Taleb, *Fooled by Randomness* (New York: Random House, 2005), xvii.

“You guys have taken all the mystery out of my class. [My students] use the framework and all the issues in the case pop right to the surface.”¹⁷

When celebration and authority come together in this way, we can see what has been called the ‘Matthew effect’ in operation. Robert K. Merton coined the phrase some forty years ago.¹⁸ The idea is that, as the gospel indicated, success begets success so that more is given to those who have. In the New Scholarship context, the operating idea is that authors who show that they are already lauded can deploy their past successes in order to increase the currency of their present message.

CRITICISMS AND RESPONSES

The devices of *self-reference*, *authority*, and *celebration* may be powerful, but it might be objected that they all involve an undue emphasis on self-promotion. Regarding *self-reference*, it might be asked why the lavishly-cited friends of the New Scholars did not read the latters’ drafts and tell them that most readers would love to be spared the self-congratulatory anecdotes. On the use of *authority*, it could be argued that the New Scholars’ arguments should speak for themselves and that it should not be necessary for an author to cite his or her eminence or intellect or even their friends as a means of selling their thesis. To *celebrate* one’s own publications with accounts of their folksy gestations and wondrous receptions might similarly be said by the New Scholarship’s detractors to be excessively self-indulgent.

There are, however, potential defences of the New Scholarship, and a first of these is that this is a style of writing that is market-driven. It is quite intentionally designed to appeal to the widest audience – and it often succeeds. These are books that are written in the trade style, and commissioning editors encourage self-reference in order to foster sales at the airport and high street bookstores. They are not written as academic tomes. In rejoinder, however, it might be questioned whether scholarship is enhanced when the university library comes closer to the airport lounge, when academic reputations and university chairs are built on ‘trade’ books, when substantive arguments are cluttered with incidental anecdote, and when self-promotion is given as much emphasis as substance.

¹⁷ T. Peters and R. Waterman, n 4 above, 11.

¹⁸ See R.K. Merton, ‘The Matthew Effect in Science: The Reward and Communication Systems of Science are Considered’ (1968) 159(3810) *Science* 56. Malcolm Gladwell has popularised the concept more recently – see M. Gladwell, *Outliers* (New York: Little Brown, 2008). On the earlier source, see Matthew, chs 13, 25; Mark, ch 4; and Luke, chs 8, 19.

A second defence, however, urges that the intellectual benefits of the New Scholarship justify the writing style adopted.¹⁹ Supporters of the New Scholarship may pray the New Journalists in aid when they point out that one does not become a Hunter S. Thompson by hiding your light under a bushel. You blast the bushel to pieces with a pump-action shotgun after consuming three bottles of Chivas Regal and enough LSD to fly a horse to the moon. You sacrifice modesty and decorum for art and the viewpoint.

The ‘intellectual benefits’ defence of the New Scholarship builds on its tenet that arguments and views are *synthetic* – they have sources in the real world that shape them. Advocates of the New Scholarship would contend that it is far more rewarding for any reader to be given the full texture, background, and origin of an idea than to be presented with the anodyne version and the fiction that the account or thesis in question is somehow dislocated from the world and unshaped by its originator.²⁰

The notion that ideas are linked and layered also reinforces the last point. There is a tendency to assume, perhaps too quickly, that when a person makes a statement, their assertion has a stand-alone quality whose validity or otherwise is to be judged on its own independent merits. If Paul asserts that John is ‘on the short side’, we might incline to look at the evidence and consider whether John is above or below the average height for a male. Further reflection, however, tells us that we can understand and respond to Paul’s statement far more advisedly if we know more about Paul. If he is a professional scout for potential National Basketball League players, we may realise that Paul is stating that, at six feet three, John could well struggle in the professional game.

The message here is that ideas are routinely formulated and held in layers – so that a contention from Paul is liable to constitute the particular application of a more general attitude or worldview. It follows that we can best understand an idea that is taken from one layer by seeing how it is nested within a host of ideas that occupy different levels of generality.

How then, does the New Scholarship enrich the understandings of readers? It is best to consider an example. Let us return to Thaler and Sunstein’s book *Nudge*.²¹ Nudging involves structuring the architecture of decisions so that it is easier for consumers or others to act in ways that are beneficial. People tend to make poor choices for a number of reasons that Thaler and Sunstein identify.²² Nudging makes it easier to make the sensible decision, but, according to its

¹⁹ A defence made with respect to the New Journalism: see D. Wakefield, ‘The Personal Voice and the Impersonal Eye’ (1966, June) *The Atlantic* 86 – who welcomes the New Journalism’s attack on the old-fashioned assumption of journalistic objectivity. For other critiques of the New Journalism, see R. Stein, *Media Power: Who Is Shaping Your Picture of the World?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972). See also D. MacDonald, ‘Parajournalism, or Tom Wolfe and His Magic Writing Machine’ (1965, August 26) *New York Review of Books* 3; J. Murphy and B. Westley (eds), *The New Journalism: A Critical Perspective* (Chicago: The Association for Education in Journalism, 1974).

²⁰ See, again, the argument in Wakefield, *ibid*.

²¹ R. Thaler and C. Sunstein, n 2 above.

²² They process information in shorthand ways that are biased by immediate concerns and experiences, they tend to be too optimistic, and so on: see R. Thaler and C. Sunstein, n 2 above, ch 1.

philosophy of 'libertarian paternalism', it purports to leave the target person free to choose to take the non-sensible course of action. An example of nudging is establishing a presumption that all citizens consent to be organ donors unless they register their unwillingness to donate.

The nudging approach thus allows for decisions to be manipulated by public authorities, provided that it leaves decision-makers free to choose to behave as they, rather than the public authorities, see fit. In its ideal form, therefore, the approach cleverly combines an element of paternalism with the preserving of freedom of choice. Critics, however, have some worries about nudging. One of these is that it is difficult, in real life situations, to draw the line between manipulations that do not threaten freedoms of choice and those that do.²³ Thaler and Sunstein's response is that opt-outs must be easy, but critics are liable to say that this is a rejoinder that is too readily and confidently offered. Such assurances of opt-out count for little, they would say, if there is no reliable way to identify and protect the easy opt-out.²⁴ 'Ease of opt-out', they would stress, is a contentious issue that lies at the heart of nudging, and Thaler and Sunstein's answer evidences the dangerousness of nudge: it treats the centrally important issue of opt-out feasibility as a small and relatively un-contentious matter. This approach, the objectors would say, sows the seeds of an illiberal system of control.

How, though, does the 'New Scholarship' expression of the nudge thesis help Thaler and Sunstein's readers? The answer is that the contextualising of the message gives it more transparency. It helps the reader to identify potential issues and challenges. This is not to state that the New Scholars' self-referencing offers the reader awarts and all portrait of the scholar at issue. The auto-images that the New Scholars offer up will generally be idealised and self-serving. They will tend, nevertheless, to disclose a great deal of useful information about the intellectual frameworks and worldviews that underpin the arguments presented.

This can be seen in the case of *Nudge*. When reading this book, the reader is gifted the knowledge that this thesis is put forward by two authors who clearly take it for granted that their readers will be interested in the rock concerts that they attend with their children and who assume quite readily that readers will want to know the names of the bands that were playing when they became thirsty. This treatment says much about the philosophical and psychological standpoints that sustain nudge, and it sends a clear signal to the reader. Nudge is a thesis that will never knowingly be undersold. It is advocated with a level of authorial self-reference, authority, and celebration that can be expected to underplay inherent dangers and to stress positives with an enthusiasm bordering on excitement. Potential critics are thus presented with a ringing alarm bell – one that is made evident by the New Scholarship presentation but which would not have been so

²³ *Nudge*, n 2 above, is memorably described as 'a textbook for tender tyranny' by Amazon reviewer, Allen Baird. See 'Big Brother is Nudging You!' (2011, November 2) *Amazon Review*.

²⁴ *ibid*, 249.

audible in a more traditional presentation of nudge theory. Thaler and Sunstein may tend to understate the dangers of nudge, but their style tells us enough to realise that this is liable to be the case.

CONCLUSIONS

It is plain that the New Scholarship deploys the devices of self-reference, authority, and celebration to considerable effect. It is likely, moreover, that the self-celebratory style of scholarly writing is unlikely to fade away in the near future. One reason for this is that modern celebrity culture favours the author-centred approach to writing, be this fiction or learned literature. The medium may have been the message in the era of Marshall McLuhan but, in this millennium, it might increasingly be said that 'the messenger is the message'. Economic realities also reinforce this position. It is the celebrity author who appears in the media; it is the celebrity scholar who is invited into government and who reaps the largest rewards.

A further reason why the New Scholarship is arguably on the rise rather than decline is its popularity in business and government circles. This level of influence beyond the academy matters even in the scholarly sphere since 'impact' on the world is treated more and more as a measure of research quality in universities.²⁵ What cannot be doubted is the extent of the New Scholars' influence: many of the books cited in this article are bestsellers, many of their authors are celebrities, and many have enjoyed influence at the heart of government. Cass Sunstein, we can note, was appointed Head of the White House Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs by President Obama in 2009, and, in the UK, Prime Minister, David Cameron established a 'nudge unit' in the Cabinet Office in 2010 with Richard Thaler as advisor.²⁶

To assert that the New Scholarship may be here to stay is not, however, to assume that it is good or bad news. On this matter, it is hard to make a conclusive assessment on the overall desirability of the New Scholarship. Much here depends on the basis for judgement. From an aesthetic perspective, some parties may object simply to the New Scholarship's self-congratulatory style. On efficiency and transactional grounds, many readers will ask why they have to read through a mini-autobiography in order to glean a point that could have been delivered in a

²⁵ In the UK's 2014 Research Excellence Framework, 20 per cent of the weighting will turn on impacts on the economy, society, and/or culture. See HEFCE, *Assessment Framework and Guidance on Submissions* (UK: HEFCE, 2011).

²⁶ New Scholars will, of course, tend to ensure that their readers do not go unaware of their place at the heart of government – as when Nicholas Negroponte disclosed: 'In September 1991 I addressed many of President Mitterand's cabinet over lunch. Perhaps because I speak French only as a second language, I could not convince them that I was not trying to get them to give up their "lead" as they called it, but to but to get rid of the "anchor around their necks", as I called it. When I met with the Japanese Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa in 1992 he was startled to learn that Hi-Vision was obsolete, Margaret Thatcher, however, did listen to me [...]' N. Negroponte, n 8 above, 40.

sentence. Those who read the New Scholarship in a less than earnest manner might also worry about the psychological damage that some readers may suffer when they see how shabbily their lives and achievements compare to those of the New Scholars that they are reading.

To be set against such worries are the positive qualities of the New Scholarship. As seen above, this is a mode of writing that offers a hugely textured kind of message. It speaks at numbers of levels, and it offers linkages between levels of ideas and real lives that are unprecedented. Above all, it offers a new kind of transparency. When the neighbours do away with their curtaining, we may not like everything that we see, but we will understand them in ways that were not possible beforehand.