

Doctor Faustus in the twenty-first century

A meditation on knowledge, power, and civic intelligence

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Abstract In the medieval legend, Doctor Faustus strikes a dark deal with the devil; he obtains vast powers for a limited time in exchange for a priceless possession, his eternal soul. The cautionary tale, perhaps more than ever, provides a provocative lens for examining humankind's condition, notably its indefatigable faith in knowledge and technology and its predilection toward misusing both. A variety of important questions are raised in this meditation including *What is the nature of knowledge today and how does it differ from knowledge in prior times? What is its relation to technology and power? What paths are we heading along and which alternative ones are being avoided?* Not insignificantly, we also raise the issue of civic ignorance, including that which is intentionally cultivated and that which is simply a lack of knowledge. We also consider the identity of Doctor Faustus in the twenty-first century and in a more material world like ours, what is the *soul* that he would lose in the bargain, and what damage might be done to Faustus and to innocent bystanders. Finally since people don't always live up to the terms of agreements they make, what, if anything, could Faustus do to wriggle out of the bargain, to avoid the loss of his all-important soul. Our response is not to disavow knowledge (as the implicit "lesson" of the original myth might suggest) but to shift to another approach to knowledge that is more collective and more responsive to actual needs of our era. This approach which we call *civic intelligence* is considered as a way to avoid the possible catastrophes that the Faustian bargain we've seemingly struck is likely to bring.

Keywords Civic intelligence · Civic ignorance · Sociology of knowledge · Technological critique · Social construction of knowledge

1 Introduction: Doctor Faustus then and now

In the medieval legend, Doctor Faustus was a scholar who had come to the unhappy realization that his knowledge and pleasures were limited. To overcome the barriers that prevented him from enjoying the fruits so unjustly denied to him, Doctor Faustus struck a deal with the devil. Thus he obtained the vast powers he desired—but at a very dear price. After a brief time [24 years according to Marlowe (1959)], he was forced to relinquish a priceless possession: his eternal soul.

Although the legend is thought to have originated with a specific person, Doctor Johann Georg Faust who lived in Germany around the turn of the fifteenth century, the story has proved to be deeply resonant and has lived on over the centuries through numerous plays, novels, operas, artworks, puppet shows and other high and low cultural forms. Most historians now believe that there was an actual historical "Faust" at one point and that he roamed extensively performing magic and giving horoscopes wherever he went. He also was given to extravagant claims and was summarily denounced by the Roman Catholic Church for his alleged blaspheming and other sins.

But that was then and this is now. What, if anything, does the Faust legend tell us about our current situation? Other myths are certainly relevant. Frankenstein (and the Golem before that) brings up themes of tinkering with life itself and building machines that ultimately turn upon their makers. The story of Pandora as well as of Adam and Eve

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