

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY – WEDNESDAY, 10TH JANUARY 2024
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The recent ITV series, *Mr Bates and the Post Office*, has catapulted a festering miscarriage of justice into the headlines and turned it into a political crisis.

Computers are of great benefit to humankind, but the post office scandal is a cautionary tale about what can happen when we become over-reliant on them. Post office leaders allowed computerised systems and corporate reputations to override their fundamental ethical responsibilities.

A few years ago one of my undergraduate students told me, “Some of us are wondering if they’ve got at you.” I was taken aback. What did she mean? She explained that I used to be a passionate lecturer and the students loved my lectures. But recently they’d noticed I was more cautious, and they were wondering if the university authorities had disciplined me. I assured her that they hadn’t, but I realized that I had been got at, not intentionally, but by the creeping computerisation of our teaching roles. We were becoming enslaved by the diktat of inflexible technological systems. Courses were being designed to conform to the requirements of databases, software programmes and tick-box evaluations based on generic criteria that quantified and commodified the learning experience.

The Humanities should encourage personal moral development through reasoned and informed reflection on challenging issues, in ways that don’t lend themselves to such systemic control. I shared my concerns with my students, believing as I do that education must nurture critical thinking and resistance in the face of the impersonalised demands of technocratic systems. We might think of this in terms of the relationship between ethical reasoning and love.

The fourth century theologian Saint Basil of Caesarea writes of ‘a power of reason ... implanted in us like a seed, containing within it the ability and the need to love.’ This resonates with a recent article by Zoe Williams in *The Guardian* newspaper, where she calls for a politics that starts ‘with a presumption of love’. She writes, ‘All resilience, zeal and creativity come from ordinary (but also extraordinary) civic love, and so the language and logic of love must be at the centre of any argument.’ The purpose of education is surely to nurture that power of reason in the service of love.

Basil defines sin as ‘the misuse of powers given us by God for doing good.’ To me, that seems like a fitting description of what went wrong when post office leaders abused their powers in ways that betrayed the logic of love.