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The Humanities and American Higher Education

I argue that the role and understanding of the humanities in American higher education has been deformed by its relationship to modern science. This deformation tracks three features of contemporary science: its rigor and characteristic method; its turn towards the technological; and the claims made by some of its practitioners and defenders to self-sufficiency and unlimited authority in all matters of knowledge. Contemporary defenses of the value of the humanities often go wrong by seeking to make the humanities either too much like science, or by asserting on behalf of the humanities the same claims to supremacy made on behalf of the sciences. I conclude by making some claims both about the intrinsic goodness of education in the humanities and about the role that study of the arts should play in a humanities education.

The role – or, perhaps, the demise – of the humanities in higher education has been a topic of increasing urgency in recent years. What seems characteristic of the discussion, wherever it is found, is the strong sense that the humanities are under siege – or even the sense that the siege is over, and that the humanities have lost. Of course, such a description raises some obvious questions: from whence comes the siege? What weaponry, tactics, and strategy should the proponents of the humanities bring to bear in fending off what are perceived to be attacks on the value of the humanities, whether overt or merely implicit? And what would count as victory for the humanities against their aggressors?

These questions will be the concern of this essay. I intend to focus primarily on the humanities in American higher education, as that is what I am most familiar with. But it would not be surprising if there were some commonalities between the condition of the humanities in the United States and elsewhere. Certainly the phenomenon that I will argue is most responsible for the damage to, and even the *deformation* of the humanities in American higher education is to be found throughout the West and elsewhere; I am referring to contemporary science.

It will be my thesis that the humanities in American higher education are indeed being damaged and deformed by science, or, more accurately, by our – the proponents of the humanities, especially those in higher education – understandings of, and responses to, the practice and images of science that are culturally prevalent. The damage and the deformation are, in fact, multi-faceted. I will argue that the humanities have gone wrong both by trying to be too much like science, and by

trying to be too much unlike it; by granting too much deference to the claims of science, and by refusing to grant science its legitimate space. The end result is a variety of approaches to the humanities that often promise more than they can deliver, and sound, in the mouths of their proponents, too much on the defensive.

I. The Challenge of Contemporary Science

I need to begin by saying some things about the state of contemporary science, and its relationship to higher education and to the broader culture. So in this section, I want to identify three features of modern science, not universal, perhaps, but pervasive. Each of these features in different ways has had an effect on how the humanities are understood, whether by detractors or proponents. Very often these new understandings are in fact distortions.

The first feature to note about modern science is a multi-featured respect in which it differs considerably from its medieval and ancient forebears, namely, in its combined emphasis on rigorous quantification and measurement, its empirical foundations, and its characteristic method of hypothesis and experimentation¹. The modern turn towards mathematization – the new science – and the bringing to bear of experimental technique on questions about the natural world and suggested answers, to say nothing of the development of instruments that allowed these two features, mathematization and empirical confirmation, to be combined, has resulted in a discipline, or field of disciplines, notable for achieving both rigor and widespread consensus. Science thereby has ceased to be an area of inquiry which, as, for example, with philosophy, is not characterized by forward and linear progress, and it has instead become something which appears to be knowledge producing. But, to repeat, quantification, mathematization, measurement, and empirical discipline were central to this transformation.

A second and related, feature of modern science is that its theoretical successes translated into practical triumphs, and it thus very quickly came to understand itself as dedicated to the conquest of nature and “the relief of man’s estate”, in Francis Bacon’s famous words². So understood, science is not ultimately about the understanding of the world so much as the transforming of it, of, again in Bacon’s words, “effecting all things possible”³; and the West has reaped the benefits of this understanding in the form of a constant stream of technological advance, advance that has in recent decades moved increasingly to the domain of the biotechnological and not merely the mechanical.

1 For a helpful overview of these features as they took shape in modern science see, W.T. Jones, *A History of Western Philosophy: Hobbes to Hume*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., New York 1969, Chapter Three.

2 Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, Shenandoah Bible Ministries, Annandale, VA 2009, p. 38.

3 Francis Bacon, *The New Atlantis* ed. Alfred B. Gough, The Clarendon Press, Oxford 1915, p. 35.

Success in the domain of modern technology has not only straightforwardly benefited us, by delivering goods and techniques formerly only imagined, such as computers, microsurgery, or the automobile. It has also, in doing that, been the essential engine of the modern economy, as those goods and services create new needs and desires, new jobs, new capital and the like. The nature of the technology has changed over time of course. For many years, the consequences of a shift an industrial economy to a knowledge and information driven economy have been visible. And it seems clear that the computer technology, biotechnology, and information technology revolutions are, in a sense, only just getting started.

So science has taken on a strongly instrumentalist character, far removed from the appearance of idle speculation, otherworldliness, and indeed barrenness that may have characterized it, and its practitioners, in earlier days, and it plays a central role in the economic life of the West.

A third, and again related feature of modern science, is its increased secularism and claims to self-sufficiency. This third feature is not, I think, a feature of science as such, although perhaps the second is not either, but it has come to characterize the scientific ethos in a number of different respects. The most apparent of these, and the most aggressive, is the so-called “new atheism”⁴. The new atheism is characterized by an extreme form of scientism, the view that only what can be demonstrated scientifically deserves to be considered knowledge⁵. Such scientism is hostile to religion in all forms, viewing it as merely a kind of superstition; it is likewise hostile to much “folk” understanding, and to the idea that non-scientific methodologies can be genuine sources of knowledge.

Moreover, secular science is also hostile, and increasingly so, to any kind of external check on its operations, not only from religion, but also from ethics and politics. The American legal scholar Carter Snead has called this view the “maximal deference” view: science should be maximally deferred to as entirely self-sufficient in its operation⁶. It needs no guidance from elsewhere, and any attempt to provide such guidance must be seen as unacceptable interfering. In the United States, this attitude was prominently on display in many discussions about embryonic stem cells. The *New York Times*, for example, has written about President Bush’s policy on stem cells that: “President Bush can try to defend his restrictions on stem cell research as good religion or good morality... What he can’t do is defend it as good science”⁷. Similarly, Alta Charo, always a reliable voice for scientific progress, has

4 See, e.g., Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston 2008.

5 For a recent criticism of scientism, and defense of the humanities, see Philip Kitcher, “The Trouble with Scientism: Why History and the Humanities are also a Form of Knowledge”, *The New Republic* May 4, 2012. Available at: <http://www.tnr.com/article/books-and-arts/magazine/103086/scientism-humanities-knowledge-theory-everything-arts-science>.

6 See O. Carter Snead, “Science, Public Bioethics, and the Problem of Integration”, in «UC Davis Law Review» 43 (2010), 1529-1604.

7 “Editorial Board of the *New York Times*”, “A Stem Cell Break-through – No Thanks to Mr. Bush”, December 6, 2007. Available at: <http://theboard.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/12/06/a-stem-cell-breakthrough-no-thanks-to-mr-bush/>

said, “Criminalizing any area of science, as opposed to merely regulating it, would be contrary to the political and constitutional traditions of academic and scientific freedom, as well as the historical spirit of inquiry that characterizes this country”⁸.

So scientism, aggressive secularism, and militant atheism characterize science, or at least the scientific ethos in the West, to a high degree, in addition to the previously mentioned features: disciplinary rigor and mathematization; and instrumentalism. In my view, proponents of the humanities have sometimes responded to these features of contemporary science in ways that have been problematic.

The reason a response has been necessary is that these three features, particularly when taken together, would appear to leave little or no need for the humanities. For if science is successful at generating consensus, and hence knowledge, where the humanities are not, and if science both brings about a better world *and* needs no help in determining what a better world would be, then there would appear to be little need of the humanities. And in fact, this has been the direction that much thinking in American higher education has taken, given a particular conception that has been adopted as to what such higher education is all about.

Consider, for example, the instrumentalism of science. If (a) science is the province of knowledge, and (b) the purpose of scientific knowledge is the relief of man’s estate, and (c) the university is the home of the pursuit of knowledge, then a natural idea to emerge is that the university too must exist for the sake of the sciences, and for some range of instrumental purposes as the sciences. The result, for the humanities, has been what the philosopher Martha Nussbaum has called a “silent crisis” in the university⁹. According to Nussbaum’s analysis, which seems plausible to me, leaders of nations *and* universities have embraced an ethos of a “rush to profitability”, which has increasingly emphasized scientific and technical education over the humanities as the main part of university research and teaching. Educators have embraced the idea, as for example, in my own university, that the role of the university is to play a central part in the generation of jobs, and the driving of the economy. In South Carolina, my home state, the university has partnered with the city and local businesses to develop what it has called “Innovista”, (a fusion of “innovation and “the Vista”, the name of the area in which the initiative is located), a research park associated with the university but integrated into the city. Here is part of the official description:

«An economic engine:

The University of South Carolina is investing in the state’s future. Innovista is the key to a new economy built on a foundation of technology and knowledge-based jobs. Private

8 Quoted in Dennis Chapman, “Reprogramming the debate: stem-cell finding alters ethical controversy”, *University of Wisconsin-Madison News*, Nov. 20, 2007. Available at: <http://www.news.wisc.edu/14475>.

9 See Martha Nussbaum, *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 20119.

tenants relocating to Innovista are expected to bring high-paying jobs that will raise the state's per-capita income». ¹⁰

It is fair to say that the result of this emphasis has been pain and suffering for the humanities. Practitioners of the traditional humanities – my colleagues (not merely in my university) in Literature, in Religious Studies, in History, or Political Theory – have seen their funding, and even department size, put at risk, have watched as administrators praise the applied sciences and ignore the humanities, and have struggled to make clear to students why they should ever be interested in taking a philosophy class (of which, more later)¹¹. The humanities seem irrelevant to many in and out of the university, especially at a time when the economy is suffering and the idea that some people should be able to make a living writing about art or literature seems almost absurd.

And the humanities have not helped themselves in the lead-up to this “crisis”. For the past few decades, many practitioners of the humanities have been following a path that seems *worse* than useless to many an outside observer, the path of radical deconstruction, of humanities-as-politics-and-protest, of identity studies, and the like. It is in the humanities that the Nietzschean-cum-Foucaultian project of unmasking has been pursued, and in which the hermeneutics of suspicion has become the primary interpretive frame through which to understand the human world. Humanities professors, like those in comparative literature departments, have reveled in revealing to students that their most fundamental beliefs are actually elaborate lies and rationalizations, hiding racism, sexism, and various other isms. Claims to truth are debunked as mere covert assertions of power; and if power is all there is, then it is also not surprising that humanities departments have become increasingly and overtly politicized: they are often now thought to be not the home of inquiry but of protest and partisanship¹².

This approach to the humanities cannot be said to have instilled much confidence in the ordinary folk who send their children to college and university, hoping that they will emerge as more mature and well-educated versions of the people they were

10 “Innovista University of South Carolina: Vision” available at: <http://innovista.sc.edu/about/vision.aspx>

11 For an overview of the decline in size and funding, and a explanation of some of the important causes, see William M. Chace, “The Decline of the English Department”, in «The American Scholar» August 2009. Available at: <http://theamericanscholar.org/the-decline-of-the-english-department/>.

12 The self-inflicted wounds of humanities departments is a theme of Anthony T. Kronman, *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2007. Of course, the political ends of some academics have been jeopardized precisely by the abandonment of the idea of objective truth, as noted by the philosopher Michael Lynch: “People like me who grew up intellectually in the nineties were soaked with the idea that those on the left must reject the idea of objective truth. That was a mistake... The fact is that we on the progressive left have done ourselves a terrible disservice by rejecting the concept of objective truth – if only because it is hard to stand up for your opinions if you think they are no more true than anyone else” (quoted in “Truth, reason, and democracy”, interview with Michael Lynch by Richard Marshall, *3:AM Magazine* May 15, 2012).

when they entered college. And thus, in the US, we have seen just recently now ex-Presidential candidate Rick Santorum say of the President, «President Obama wants everybody in America to go to college, what a snob». He continued, «There are good, decent men and women who work hard every day and put their skills to the test that aren't taught by some liberal college professor...trying to indoctrinate them»¹³.

Santorum's words, ill-chosen and misleading as they are, nevertheless reflect some degree of common sentiment about just how colleges went off the rails: by the marriage of liberal politics and higher education in the person of humanities professors in particular. Until recently, it would seem, practitioners of the humanities have been their own worst enemies, and are partially responsible for their subsequent marginalization. And the range of hostility that can be shown by the average professor of English literature to businesspeople, religious people, the military, and others, a phenomenon I will return to below, has likewise done them no favors. The exile of the humanities has thus been in part self-imposed. But the lessons from exile have not, I shall now argue, been well learned.

II. Humanities as the Engine of Economic Growth

One lesson taken away from the preceding story is, not surprisingly, that the humanities must have some justification available to it in terms of the role of humanities in a nation's economic well-being. In some ways, practitioners of the humanities have a strong case to make here, although in other ways, their claims are problematic.

A typical way in which this argument is made goes something like this. It is in the humanities that students learn to write and read critically, to speak clearly, to think in a reflective and broad minded way. And these skills are essential for leadership in the workplace, and in success in business. As one university's philosophy department web site puts it: «A liberal arts education helps you gain basic skills in critical thinking, argumentation, communication, information management, design and planning, research and investigation, and management and administration. These skills are absolutely essential for success in virtually every career path, especially in today's information age»¹⁴.

Are these claims born out by the facts on the ground? I believe that they are to some extent: a 2007 article in *The Guardian*, for example, showed an *increase* in the percentage of philosophy graduates with jobs in business, finance, marketing and advertising over a five year period¹⁵. An article in the *New York Times* a year later similarly focused on the

13 David Lightman, "Barack Obama, Snob", Planet Washington, February 25, 2012. Available at: <http://blogs.mcclatchydc.com/washington/2012/02/barack-obama-snob.html>.

14 Website for the Department of Philosophy, Illinois State University. Available at: <http://philosophy.illinoisstate.edu/major/careers.shtml>.

15 Jessica Shepherd, "I think, therefore I earn," *The Guardian*, Monday 19 November 2007. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2007/nov/20/choosingadegree.highereducation>.

value of a philosophy degree even in a troubled economy¹⁶. These are positive signs, not just for philosophy, but for the humanities general. Yet at the same time, approximately twenty percent of all undergraduate majors in US universities are business majors. And as universities cut back on *required* humanities courses, it is a legitimate and open question whether the humanities will be able to keep pace.

The claim that the humanities generally inculcate skills, especially critical thinking and critical writing, that are useful across a range of career possibilities is, I believe, true. However, in my view, the instrumentalist argument for the humanities, while true as far as it goes, also goes wrong in two important ways.

One such way is related to the trends I identified above in humanistic disciplines. For those who have embraced the paradigm shift in the humanities to the postmodern, much of what once was essential to the humanities is not only bad, it is also useless. How can we show to the incoming freshman that the humanities are important if all he or she sees, in being presented with the traditional texts or works of art of the humanities, are instances of racism, sexism, colonialism, or some other form of oppression? And so the new trends in the humanities are seen as necessary for overcoming both the evils, and also the “irrelevance” of the humanities. Yet, as I have noted, the appeal of this form of the humanities to the very people to whom it is offered is quite low: incoming university students are not typically impressed by the prospect of being told that they are part of a corrupt power structure in virtue of their having religious beliefs, or wanting to work for a business after graduation, and neither are their parents. The center does not hold.

But even more importantly, to focus exclusively, in justifying the humanities, on its instrumental value and character is to slight, in the humanities, that which is constitutive of its very being. The “liberal arts”, the practices that preceded, but overlap considerably with, the humanities, were the arts and inquiries of *free* people, people who were not bound to the pursuit of instrumentalities in order to make money for themselves or others. The liberal arts were viewed as good for their own sake, as a valuable part of a good life, regardless of whatever else they might help one to accomplish. In sacrificing this tenet of its existence to the gods of instrumentalism and the economy, the humanities undermine their own being; and they further set themselves up for the day in which, for whatever reason, the study of the humanities might *not* be necessary for success in “virtually every career path” – on that day, there will be no further need for the humanities.

I will return later to the claim that the humanities are good in themselves. For now, I simply register my worry that this response of the humanities to the technological supremacy of science, has been insufficient. And I here take the opportunity to register a similar concern about Nussbaum’s approach, although it could also be mentioned in the next section. Nussbaum believes that the over-emphasis on

16 Winnie Hu, “In a New Generation of College Students, Many Opt for the Life Examined,” *The New York Times*, April 6, 2008. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/06/education/06philosophy.html?ex=1208318400&en=642a82177643705b&ei=5070&emc=eta1>.

scientific and technological education has been damaging to the project of educating for democratic citizenship, a project that depends upon the humanities as a means of broadening human sympathies and sensitivities and inculcating respect of all. I believe the claim is overstated on behalf of the humanities, as I shall discuss below; but even if true, this would not get to the heart of the matter.

III. The New “Humanitiesism”

As I have noted, “scientism” is the attitude that science is the only province of knowledge and that it is thereby sufficient for all human needs and should be given maximal deference. I believe that this attitude is mirrored amongst some practitioners of the humanities, and that this accounts for some prominent features of contemporary humanistic inquiry.

This mirroring can be seen, perhaps, in looking at the unstated presuppositions of some of the proponents of the humanities. Consider the following claim from a discussion I was a part of, involving the director of an arts endowment in New York City. In the aftermath of 9/11, this gentleman reported, it would have been impossible for the city to get by “without the humanities.” Or, here is a remark made by a dean of a language department at the same conference. She noted that she wished those who rushed to war after 9/11 had had the benefit of a humanities education. Or, finally, a third example from the same conference, yet another participant assumed that the starting point for discussion about the “Occupy” movement was that they were entirely in the right, and that the humanities was where that would be demonstrated and where Occupy demonstrators would find the social support they needed.

There is a blindness in these remarks to values that many Americans takes as essential: religion, patriotism, business and the free market, for example. It is another example of the way that the humanities is its own worst enemy. But more importantly, I believe there is an underlying sense here that the humanities provide a sufficient guide for the good and virtuous life, were it only to be provided maximal deference – the same claim that the scientific mentality makes!

On the one view, that is to say, science is all that we need: if everyone were guided by science, the good life would be at hand. On the other view, the same is true of the humanities. But this view is false in at least two ways, ways that parallel the falseness of scientism.

First, while the humanities, unlike science, does at least have claim to consider normative matters, it is highly presumptuous to think that it is the *scholars* of the humanities in the acknowledged humanistic disciplines who have the final say about what is normatively the case.¹⁷ To think that it is only humanist scholars

17 For an expression of skepticism as regards this, see Gilbert Meilaender, “On Bioethics in Public”, *The New Atlantis* Fall 2009-Winter 2010. Available at: <http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/on-bioethics-in-public>.

who have expertise in morality and values is to presume an authority that does not seem justified by the evidence. For example, what of the manifest normative disagreement between those in the humanities? How is that to be squared with claims to expertise? Moreover, given the evident selection bias of those entering the university, the claim to expertise is implicitly a claim to the truth of liberal, over conservative values. Further, the claim to expertise among scholars runs counter to a plausible thought that conscience speaks in the breast of every human being, and can even be *obscured* by too much learning. And, like scientism, and motivated perhaps by similar concerns, what I am calling humanitiesism seems definitively to set religious values out of the picture, contrary to the actual practice of many people: for most of the country, and for many New Yorkers, it was religion that people turned to in the aftermath of 9/11, not the humanities¹⁸.

A second kind of problem is that there is no reason to think, contrary to the dean's suggestion, that the humanities will, just on their own, make people better or better choice-makers. While the humanities can be important to a well-lived life, as I will argue below, the study of humanistic objects of inquiry does not itself guarantee virtue; indeed, progress in virtue must surely precede the study of the humanities, as a result of parental child-rearing practice and discipline, and good and upright choices, or the study of the humanities will be merely an accompaniment to vice. The idea that the humanities will bring about a world of peace, democratic citizenship, or economic justice seems an instance of over-promising if ever there was one.

IV. False Conceptions of Rigor

In his book *The End of Education*, Anthony Kronman, a professor at Yale University, and formerly the dean of its law school, traces the history by which the humanities became marginalized in American higher education. On Kronman's account, the purpose of the humanities is to pursue, in a non-discipline specific way, questions about the meaning of life. But the rise of the research university in Germany required linear progress in the advance of knowledge, something that, it was seen in the US, could only really be accomplished by the hard sciences and the social sciences. Accordingly, the humanities became increasingly marginalized¹⁹.

However, the attempt to remake the humanities in the image of disciplines that progress in a linear fashion has been a recurrent temptation, two instances of which I will mention here.

One is to be found in my own discipline, philosophy. Philosophers have striven to make their practice "more scientific" in a variety of ways: the geometrical method

18 Kronman's book too, for all its merits, ends on a note of some antipathy to religion. He acknowledges that religion speaks to the spiritual void left by the all-encompassing embrace of science, and argues that it is not God that has been forgotten, but man, not religion that is needed, but the humanities.

19 See Kronman, *Education's End*, especially Chapter Three.

of Descartes and Spinoza, the hypothetico-deductive approach of the logical positivists, Quine's naturalized epistemology, and, most recently, "experimental" philosophy (sometimes called "X-Phil"), an approach much favored by young philosophers, but primarily given to designing "experiments" for the purpose of surveying the "common" folk's intuitions and reactions to various scenarios. These intuitions are often, apparently, different from those appealed to by philosophers themselves and provide un-philosophically contaminated data against which to judge philosophical theories.

A different approach to rigor is to be found in the field, which has within only a couple of years become ubiquitous, of the "digital humanities." "Digital humanities" perhaps refers to too wide a variety of practices, attitudes, methods, and aspirations to admit of a simple description, but it seems clear that at least one large part of the field, and perhaps its guiding idea, is the determination to make the methods of the computer sciences, including statistics and data analysis, play a much larger and perhaps dominant role in the approach to literary texts. An important part of the digital humanities project, of course, is making these texts accessible for such analysis, by digitalizing them; but subsequently, various forms of pattern analysis are to be given priority over what is called "close reading." Here is a passage from the literary theorist Stanley Fish describing, partly through quotation from the work of scholars of the digital humanities, what is desired:

«This is where the computer comes to the rescue. Digitize the entire corpus and you can put questions to it and get answers in a matter of seconds. We can, says Wilkens, "look for potentially interesting features without committing months and years to extracting them via close reading". The Stanford scholar Franco Moretti calls this method of analyzing huge bodies of data "distant reading". The Shakespearian scholar Martin Mueller briskly urges humanists to "stop reading". So much for the old humanist program»²⁰.

The phrase "distant reading" in this quotation is set off from "close" reading: the disciplined reading of a text which has been, in some form or other, the preferred method of much humanistic inquiry – I will say more about this in my final section. But I have said enough here to make a general point about the digital humanities: like experimental philosophy, it seeks to remake humanistic inquiry in the image of science: hence the emphasis on "algorithmic and quantitative analysis" – the mathematization that set modern science on its path – and "data" – again the empirical tether partially responsible for modern science's tangible success.

But this really is, I believe, a deformation, as can be seen from the following thought: unless the digital humanities allow within their scope every possible form of digitalizable text – and there are strands of the digital humanities that

20 Stanley Fish, "Mind Your P's and B's: The Digital Humanities and Interpretation", *Opinionator: Exclusive Online Commentary From The Times*, January 23, 2012. Available at: <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/01/23/mind-your-ps-and-bs-the-digital-humanities-and-interpretation/>.

trend in this direction – then the text to which analysis is brought to bear must already have been subject to some normative judgment: *these*, and *not those*, are the texts it is *worth* analyzing. And similarly, in experimental philosophy, at least the questions that matter, for which X-Phil is then brought on board, cannot themselves have been determined by the methods of X-Phil. But determining the questions that matter is itself a work of philosophy, and not one, apparently, that can be accomplished by a survey of the man on the street's intuitions, or by any other "scientific" approach. Nor can philosophy as regards its answers *stop* with intuitions, whether of philosophers or anyone else's: yet philosophical argument is not itself carried out by the methods of science. The mandate of the humanities, whether in philosophy or in literature (and similar claims could be made for history, political theory, and so on) must be other than that of science.

V. What Should the Humanities Be?

I will make one last critical point by way of answering this question. It is common to think that there must, in fact, be some *one* thing that humanistic inquiry, conversation, study, or scholarship should be about. A typical answer is something like Kronman's: the humanities are about the attempt to understand the meaning of life; a similar, but more Socratic answer would be: the humanities are our attempt to understand ourselves, and the human condition, an attempt that takes place by a close reading of the seminal texts in which other human beings have attempted to do this work – the practice of the humanities is thus a participation in the "great conversation" that takes place over generations and even millennia, a conversation going back to Homer and Plato, continuing up through Augustine, Aquinas, and Dante, and so on into the moderns and beyond.

I believe this is half right. For there are, within the humanities, disciplines that seek precisely to understand the human person and the world he or she lives in. This understanding includes as part of its essence the attempt to understand human beings from a normative standpoint: we understand our essence not only by knowing what we are, but what we ought to be, and by recognizing in history, for example, the ways in which we have lived, or have failed to live, up to what we ought to be.

On this conception, philosophy is perhaps the central humanistic discipline, though religious studies or theology, depending on where one is, is also important: as are history, cultural studies, politics, economics, and the like. Here it really does make sense to think of there being something like a Great Conversation into which students might be initiated, and in which faculty are senior members with some authority. And it makes similar sense to think that the fruits of disciplined and intelligent participation in that conversation will provide additional benefits: increased critical reasoning skills and literacy, a greater sense of social responsibility and awareness of a democratic ethos, an awareness of the importance of virtue and a desire for it; still, as I have said, we should not hang everything on the practice of the humanities where these benefits are concerned.

I believe there is a different role for the study of the arts to play, however. Many parts of humanistic inquiry concern themselves with the question “What is the Good Life?”, and seek to provide an answer. But literary studies, and the reading, and writing and talking about, literary texts, already, as I have noted, presupposes some answers to the questions about what should be read: great works of literature. And the same could be said of the study of great works of art in any other media. But are these works great because they provide important answers to the question of the good and the meaning of life? Many – Kronman is but one example – believe so, and see Homer as one part of the Great Conversation just like Plato; but I think rather that they are part of the canon because they have been judged to be *part* of the good life: a well lived life should have access to, and be capable of taking some enjoyment in, great works of art and literature.

But to do so requires at least two skills that humanistic learners must be taught. One is the skill to read, listen to, or view great works for enjoyment, a task that is far from easy. It is much simpler, and more immediately gratifying, to read, watch, listen to, trash – there is nothing wrong in itself with this, but an entire life fed with only such a diet is a life missing out on what is truly beautiful²¹. But the truly beautiful requires disciplined work; no teenager sits down to Shakespeare the first time with real pleasure.

And it also requires discernment. Not everything that appears to be beautiful really is. Humanistic inquiry and practice therefore must, I believe, inculcate the skills of *criticism*, the ability to pass judgment on what is and is not worth the discipline and appreciation that great art requires. And this, in turn, inevitably leads to truly philosophical questions about what constitutes great art, what is beauty, and the relationship between the beautiful, the good, and the true. So the two tasks of the humanities – the great conversation, and the inculcation of skill in appreciation and criticism of the arts, are not entirely distinct. But they are distinct enough that I believe a disservice is done to great works of art *and* great works of philosophy if we take their study simply to be doing the same sorts of things.

But none of these tasks is the work of science, which is, simply put, the understanding of the natural world. Science makes no normative judgments, and concerns itself not a bit with questions of beauty or goodness, much less the meaning of life. Accordingly, nothing but ill waits for the humanities to the extent that it defines itself in terms of the aspirations or successes of science. The humanities cannot be as rigorous, they cannot pretend to provide everything we need, and they cannot be understood as an essentially instrumental platform from which we can effectively achieve economic growth and prosperity. At the same time, however, the humanities are such that without them we would indeed be worse off, and be worse people, than when they are in good working order.

21 I have discussed the concept of “trash” at somewhat greater length in “The Ancient Quarrel Between Philosophy and Poetry: U2 and Trash”, in *U2 and Philosophy: How to Decipher an Atomic Bomb*, Open Court, Chicago 2006, pp. 189-200.

Achieving such good working order is the fundamental task of the humanities in higher education, in the United States, and elsewhere, in the years to come.

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