Thoughts on the Role of the Humanities in Contemporary Life

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What if we simply consider at the outset that the role of the humanities in contemporary life is a continuation and transformation of their role since their invention by the Renaissance humanists—that is, to increase the possibilities of, and deepen the contexts for, judgment? Far from fading, the demand for judgments of many kinds, including an estimation of what is human in humanity, is all the more pressing and constant in this period of remarkable interventions in biology, and in nature more broadly, for good or ill. It may no longer be possible to follow Pico della Mirandola’s Oration on the Dignity of Man and see our capacity for self-forming as what separates us from animals and leads us to aspire to a seat near the divine. We feel more than ever the connection our species has to the fate of other species and the remoteness of powerful forces beyond us. Yet the decisions and choices we make regarding our self-forming are inescapably, and fortunately, our own. We are image-making and symbol-wielding beings with a prolonged infancy as individuals and as a species. Our anthropomorphization of ourselves remains our primary task, and the arts and humanities are the spheres where that task is undertaken.

As our knowledge of the cosmos is bound to concepts of measurement that find their origin inevitably in the extent of the human body, so is our reason bound by our knowledge of mind and the finitude of that knowledge. Pythagoras and modern cosmologists alike have dreamed of a mathematical model of consonance between the structure of our thought and the forms of the universe. Yet even if such a model could be discovered, we would be returned to the same problems of meaning and consequence that we have faced and continue to face. Pico was interested in the feeling of happiness and exercise of freedom that drove the will both to conserve and change, and that agenda, a secular and universal one, is more urgent than ever.

If there is a “crisis in the humanities” today, it would seem that this is not because there is too little work for the humanities to do, but far too much. “What is human life?” “What is the purpose of human life; toward
what ends do we strive, and what actions should be valued?” “How and why do we perpetuate tradition when we have come to organize it as an infinite array of information?” “To what degree will we pursue physical pleasure and the postponement of death?”—these are questions that cannot be answered with any universal satisfaction by religion or science alone; and it will not do to reduce them to separate culture-specific spheres, for they involve the lives of each of us and connect each life to that of others.

Further, though these questions require answers arising from the independence of individual thought—that is, thought based in the particularity of experience and released from immediate contingent need—they cannot be answered by individuals governing themselves alone. In the end such answers will only be realized within a public sphere where language is taken up and evaluated, and so shaped by reasons. Judgment is the ligature between the privacy of thought and the public world of action. Yet a public sphere of universal scope, and with sufficient power to act upon decisions made in common, has yet to be invented. In 1958, Hannah Arendt was already writing in *The Human Condition* about the consequences that global development, and a concomitant decline of familial and national identifications, would bring to our sense of humanity: “The decline of the European nation-state system; the economic and geographic shrinkage of the earth, so that prosperity and depression tend to become world-wide phenomena; the transformation of mankind, which until our own time was an abstract notion or a guiding principle for humanists only, into a really existing entity whose members at the most distant points of the globe need less time to meet than the members of a nation needed a generation ago—these mark the beginnings of the last stage in this development. . . . But whatever the future may bring, the process of world alienation, started by expropriation and characterized by an ever-increasing progress in wealth, can only assume even more radical proportions if it is permitted to follow its own inherent law.”

We cannot expect individuals to care about what is far from them in time and space more intensely than they care about what is near, nor would such facile empathy necessarily be desirable for those who receive it. Identifications and care are rooted in the local, beginning with a sense of the self. But the change Arendt notes, wherein “mankind” has been transformed from an abstraction to a reality, is like the emerging fact that our decisions regarding our relation to nature will have an impact upon all generations to come. Such realizations make it no longer possible to follow private interests or national interests without a measured consideration of a larger sphere of consequences.
Developments like the Geneva Accords and Kyoto agreement, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, and the establishment of international tribunals for crimes against humanity all reflect an acknowledgment of the specificity of mankind and the possibility of universal consensual judgments oriented toward the future. When the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established, its stance against revenge was, I believe, as world-shaking as the previous transformation of the Furies into the Eumenides that is recorded in the *Oresteia*. The challenge remains, however, of creating institutions that are flexible and responsive in their operation and sufficiently deliberative in their reasoning. Human rights organizations, Doctors Without Borders, and civil liberties groups often are capable of acting quickly and effectively because they work within clear ethical mandates; meanwhile thousands die because a definition of genocide has not been established by ponderous bureaucratic structures such as NATO or the United Nations. Responsibility remains an abstraction when there is no social group to embody it.

Recent global conflicts based in seemingly incommensurable religious positions cannot be reconciled within the terms of reasoned judgment alone. Fundamentalisms of all types are a threat to humanism because of tenets as disparate as their surrender of individual authority, denigration of women and sexual minorities, and refusal of hermeneutics. Nevertheless, these religious movements become much more intelligible when they are seen in the light of their deep ambivalence regarding the consequences of modernity. The margin of secular interest within such religious groups remains rooted in notions of humanity and is often concerned with issues of charity, social justice, and dignity. These recurring commandments of generosity and hospitality are not necessarily otherworldly in their focus and so must be open to the views of neighbors and strangers. Meanwhile, corporations have the legal status, but none of the obligations, of persons, and conservative regimes throughout the world have good reason to resist their encroachment even if they have no good reasons to resist the education, physical well-being, and expanded rights for women, children, and others that development might bring.

In the face of these divisive and regressive world conditions, the historical specificity and density of the humanities provide a rare resource for imagining universals. The genesis of humanistic study in the thought of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment does not make it merely a product of its moment of emergence. To follow out that thought rigorously means to look for differences, commonalities, and revisions that might extend the concept of humankind in the West to other past and future traditions. All “progressive” critiques of the
Enlightenment ensue from the Enlightenment’s own principles, and it is in academic and artistic life that the leisure and freedom to pursue thought and making for their own sake are most likely to be possible.

Therefore it is all the more surprising that the humanities are often today in need of defense. Humanities departments are the “third world” of the economies of many schools and universities, and, in response, humanistic studies, including the arts, have taken up reactive postures of professionalism, scientism, and novelty. Each of these avenues has been a mistake for quite specific reasons. Professionalism operates within a strict separation of spheres of knowledge and reifies procedures of accreditation—hence giving inordinate power to those in charge of such procedures and making humanistic work a matter of fulfilling already-determined requirements. While the promulgation of expertise increases the local reliability of evidence and has much value in itself for that reason, it also narrows the scope of those problems and questions posed in the first place. There is a need for training in the humanities that is interdisciplinary and foundational at once.

Science is based in fixed procedures and seeks replication of results. When work in the humanities has adopted a mantle of mere scientism, it has become a means to a predetermined end. Whether it is followed by physical scientists working along a commercial agenda or art historians in the shadow of connoisseurship, this kind of practice quickly devolves into mere technique. Nevertheless, methodological problems suffuse pure science as well, and any scholarship engaged in a hunt for information will find itself caught in the same false teleology of progress. Science, like common sense, aims to confound assumptions based on the senses alone and to correct the vagaries of intuition. Although science produces genuine knowledge, it also often leads to insights that paradoxically are based on a distrust of our own nature. The motivation of that nature is precisely what escapes scientific reason. At the same time, ignorance of basic science and of the material causes of human action leads many humanists mistakenly to view such action as free from contingency and unconnected to the rest of the living world. Scientists cannot turn to science to find solutions to the moral problems that arise as an outcome of their practice, but humanists cannot stand in ignorance of science if they expect to have a place in debates about the ends of research and technology.

When intellectual work is tied to the production of particular results, boredom ensues, and a demand for novelty invades intellectual life. Reifying method, this demand for novelty ensures its own perpetual obsolescence. Here the commodity system contaminates scholarship and speculative thought alike, but it is also the case that the commodity system is bound up with an analogously facile method and boredom
with results. The revolt today against global capitalism is not merely a matter of nostalgia on the one hand and utopian thinking on the other—it also speaks to a revulsion against the weak forms of cognition and consolation offered by the commodity system. Meanwhile, when intellectual work becomes fashionable, it is subject to the vagaries of fashion—including a fashion for the “classic” and “time-worn” as “revivals.”

One of the most treasured principles of the humanities is a notion of individuality that is readily challenged by what we know about the interdependence of life forms. The motility and expression of emotion that we share with other animals is a source of commonality as much as a basis for human singularity. The humanities begin at the point where this animal nature is recognized, just as our individuality as political and intellectual agents begins at the threshold of our social recognition—a recognition that is in turn dependent upon our consent to be governed by it. The disciplines of the humanities have been caught up in false debates between materialism and spiritualism, history and theory, and other antinomies that are produced mutually in the first place. Humanistic study based in materialism quickly devolves to a descriptive abyss, a form of atomism rooted in the very subjective perceptions it seeks to elude. Studies based in spiritual assumptions allegorize their objects and cannot produce any new knowledge. Scholars who accept historical periodization without querying models of time are placed under similar restraints of typicality; and theoretical work that does not open itself to particulars will be exposed to contradictions whether it seeks them or not.

Such methodological tenets are obvious and have been with us as long as Kant’s aphorism that percepts without concepts are empty and concepts without percepts are blind. But a deeper quandary arises from our tendency toward such binary formulations, the stable cousins of our equally strong propensity toward ready synthesis. The leveling-out consequent to this kind of thought invades a wide range of domains in contemporary life—from the “learning games” that have become so popular in classrooms at every level, to the “two sides of every opinion” dynamic of public reportage and debate. Not everything, of course, has two sides, and the multiplication of perspectives in itself is morally neutral. Whereas a consideration and elaboration of perspectives is vital to thought, it is also preliminary and cannot serve as a substitute for reasoned judgment.

There has been a great deal of argument, from the early modern quarrels about the ancients and the moderns, to recent curricular struggles in high schools and universities, about what to teach and carry forward to coming generations. In addition to the many “conservative”
and “progressive” positions regarding these quarrels, there has also been a movement to “teach the debate.” But this is not a decision where success or failure depends upon the content, nor where works of art and literature and the facts of history can be relied upon to “represent” some finite body of ideas or values. The intended artifacts that make up the legacy of the humanities are potentially infinite and in every case overdetermined, for our reception of them is always belated, and that belatedness is not a lack, but rather a resource. Judgments about conscious acts of remembering and forgetting the past, of which this is only one dimension, must be made, and at the same time we cannot control the potential effects that ensue from such choices. There is, again, no transcendent position. But a pedagogy based inevitably on acts of intuitive valuation and lifelong practices of writing and making, reading and rereading, and attentive listening and looking will be richer and bear more capacity for discovery than one based on ready-made objects of contemplation and preexisting frames of apprehension.

It is part of the very nature of the documents and objects studied by the humanities that they can alter our apprehension of time. They are the archives of all the generations before us, archives of folly as well as wisdom, and carry the full weight of our legacy from the past, which we otherwise bear partially and largely unconsciously. Memory and imagination, like forgiveness and promises, are ways of transcending our immersion in our lived relation to time, and our models for these possibilities lie in the works of literature, art, music, history, and philosophy that have been carried into the present. When the humanities emerged in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as forms of literary culture, “polite” or “profane” learning, rooted in the study of the Latin and Greek language and literature, they embraced the repertoire of human self-making and self-knowledge. Think of emotions such as patience, greed, cleverness, jealousy, persistence, vision, grief, regret, curiosity, suffering, devotion, generosity—is it possible to know such qualities merely in the flow of experience without the forms literature and art provide for them? These emotions are called Penelope, Midas, Tom Thumb and Odysseus, Iago and Hera, Aeneas, Tiresias, Hecuba, Faust, Pandora, Job, Alcestis, Philemon and Baucis, and a thousand other names. Imagine the constraints upon our five senses without the use—we might say the prosthesis—made available to them in painting, sculpture, music, theater, dance, film, and literature, both oral and written. Consider the poverty of a world where past actions and events had never been organized or interpreted as historical narratives or philosophical examples. Made forms call for interpretation and, by their very incompleteness, call us to our place among our human kind. We know our humanity is unfinished on the level of our individual existence
and on the level of the destiny of our species; the finite intended works produced by the arts and humanities are the domain where we are free to express, explore, understand, and extend what our humanity might be.

We could conclude that the aim of the arts and humanities is to increase the openness of chance, and even error—and hence to produce the ironic and deliberative knowledge that ensues from the recognition of error. If all of our thought is ends-oriented, there will be tremendous pressure to make results conform to expectations, and nothing could be more disastrous for the imagination and the production of insight. Mistakes may be costly within the finite terms of the economic system. But in the bigger picture—that of the success of human life as a product of human making—the banishment of mistakes would be far costlier, for it would mean the end of learning. Why is it not possible to reduce the endless production and consumption of excess, useless, wealth in goods and to increase the production and consumption of excess—and in the richest sense, useless—knowledge? The malaise of a society with too much material wealth has been evident throughout history, but a society weakened by too much knowledge has yet to appear. A people who have no opportunities for creativity are bound to seek out sensational and ultimately violent forms of excitation in order to know they are alive; those who have no opportunity for thought and action are ripe for political manipulation and tyranny.

Everywhere they turn, the sciences and religion encounter, and seek an escape from, death. Yet what is the point of a prolonged life if it results in becoming an artifact of a technology we have forgotten that we have invented? And why seek an end to the tasks of thought, when the true task is to find some common means to disseminate and perpetuate it in the pursuit of those forms of significance that are uniquely our own?

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