

THE DESIGN OF THE HUMANITIES

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INTRODUCTION: Origin and Destination

The origin of the essay that follows is the assignment to design a course approach to the teaching of the humanities in today's colleges and universities. Conventionally, the humanities generally include the literary disciplines, the plastic arts, music, some forms of philosophy and sometimes history (depending upon narrative and analytical styles). Theology or organized religion should be included, especially as so many people are today either secular or observe their faith outside of traditional venues. Religion historically provided guides for human conduct. The subject of human conduct, its definition, its reality, its consequences for living, is a fundamental aspect of a humanities education.

The word "design" in the title carries a nuance. It refers to the objects or aims of the humanities – their "design" as in teleology – and to an actual course embodying the principles of a humanistic education. In the part of the world where I live the humanities today are described as beleaguered with limited relevance to the world of work following graduation, I will mention why I think the humanities have undermined their strengths and compromised their standing within universities. I have decided to discuss my own views about these issues before actually providing the example of a course for undergraduates. But my own views are not original. They are based on trends and innovations that suggest a more positive strain in how higher education regards the humanities. Above all – and I will repeat this point more than once – I do not consider the humanities to be separate from all the other forms of knowing and understanding that are available within higher education. All teach critical reasoning, logical analysis, clarity of thought and offer ways of comprehending the human experience. The salient point, however, is that knowledge is seamless. The crossing of disciplinary boundaries is a fact of academic life. Each day, with every discovery, scientific and technical knowledge feeds into the humanities whether or not overtly acknowledged. And the opposite is likewise true. The task is to identify and strengthen these inter-dependent ties to reach a fuller comprehension of what it means to be human. I find the taxonomical barriers between the forms of knowledge to be artificially secured through institutional convenience. I advocate a return to the conception of the "unity of knowledge." Seen in this light, the humanities do not need "defending."

I do have one other caveat. This essay has its limitations. It is being written from the perspective of America's universities and colleges. Given the variety of higher education course systems throughout the world today, such an approach is incomplete. It may inform, but it cannot provide a template for other nations. However, because post-1945 American colleges and university systems have had an outsize influence on other nations, however partial, even a

parochial approach offers insights. *A fortiori*, it is even difficult to compare “national” systems in today’s global, plural environment. All nations possess differentiated higher education missions, an accumulation of teaching, research, professional and vocational institutions. Many of these resemble their counterparts in other nations more than companions in their own domestic setting. Even institutions designated as “technical” teach subjects that appear to be irrelevant to their original mission. A discussion of the provision for humanities education in one country, when viewed comparatively, invariably improves an understanding of home-grown varieties.

HUMANITIES ON THE DEFENSIVE

Throughout the twentieth century, and continuing to the present, advocates of the humanities (defined as specific disciplines) have been on the defensive. The humanities are seen and see themselves as second-class citizens less competitive in labor markets. Science and technology, especially now computer technology, have rearranged our living spaces, transformed much of our economies and labor markets, improved health and directed attention to social and economic problem-solving. New scientific understandings of human cognitive ability are emerging, going well beyond any routine understanding of how the mind operates. Global financial networks have increased attention on money-making, which, as moralists have said from time immemorial, may be necessary but not sufficient. While the humanities have struggled to explain that a life well-lived is more than simply the acquisition of wealth, the realities of living have understandably favored comfort and employability. National academic societies issue reports designed to reassure humanities, or liberal education students generally that they possess special skills that do in fact enhance their prospects for a good career. Amongst them are the ability to communicate, persistence, self-confidence, self-awareness, empathy, pleasure in lifelong learning. These are important. They feed into and inform a life of meaning, but the list sees liberal education and the humanities role within it as largely career-related, skills and proficiencies. Missing from it, or perhaps disguised within it, are those special qualities of living, the moral existence embedded within discussions of how to achieve humanistic outcomes (Pasquerella p.5).

While it is also tempting to blame a moribund interest in humanistic learning on media philistinism (in my view, with much justification), a popular craze for entertainment or simply social indifference, this is only part of the story. Particular intellectual trends within humanistic disciplines have also added to a decline in its general authority. One is a heavy-handed vocabulary, a tendency towards the use of academic jargon, where once elegance of expression was valued, or, at the very least, comprehensible prose. Another, feeding the first, has been the importation into English of intellectual trends from France, notably from thinkers like Jacques Derrida or Michel Foucault or Jacques Lacan. While some scholars find these unorthodox insights compelling or intellectually stirring, they are at bottom adversarial. They go by various names, amongst them being deconstruction or post-modernism where the integrity of authorship itself is challenged by the critic. The author is proclaimed “dead” because any written, or indeed visible work must be interpreted. So diverse are the interpretations that both the “authority” of the author or a presumption of objectivity is lost. The reader or viewer

becomes the author. Christopher Celenza (2021) attributes this school of thinking to a deep-seated hatred for the failures of eighteenth-century Enlightenment idealism, its promises of democracy and individual rights destroyed by the subsequent tragic events of modern times. Detractors go even further. They dismiss the very notion of idealism in the modern age and do not find any uplifting messages in a study of the humanities. All “texts,” they say are in the service of special political or cultural interests. Far from granting the humanistic disciplines a principal voice in advancing the hopes of mankind, the post-modernists have denied this possibility. Celenza himself regrets this understanding of the humanities. It is ahistorical and misguided. Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine (1986), in their close reading of the works of early modern humanist writers, admire the achievement of those scholars. However, they have also suggested that humanism could not keep up with its own high hopes for a pragmatic application of the philological ideals that they advanced, especially with respect to the inculcation of the magical word “virtue,” high principles and right behavior.

Celenza does not entirely agree with scholars who berate the dominance of famous authors who are regarded as too European, or male. The charge is a feature of the “culture wars” that have been raging in the United States for decades as the nation debates unfortunate aspects of its history. But if we go back in time to the Italian Renaissance, whose scholars provided so many of the ideas pertaining to the worth of the humanities, we find there the methods and advances in learning that explored universal themes with an astonishing breadth. And that inspiration eventually made possible an appreciation of the humanistic contributions overlooked at the outset, such as by women, or ethnic minorities or others regarded as outliers in the literary world in whatever countries they lived. Nevertheless, it must be said that the acknowledging the contributions of those once considered outside the “great tradition” (the words of the Cambridge University literary critic F.R. Leavis) has not always been forthcoming.

History records many instances of talent that have been ignored. The point is that excoriating “the great tradition” endangers the preservation of an extraordinary inheritance, unsurpassed in so many ways. Those acquainted with it are dejected by its repudiation, especially because so much anger and blame are part of the culture wars. Unfortunately, an ideological and political tone has also marched alongside the changes, a revitalized neo-Marxism where art is always seen to be in the service of a particular class or group.¹ What has been lost is the inherited belief in the humanities as subjects that are ennobling and worthy of study because they illuminate the human experience in many different dimensions, not just class, gender, or religious persuasion but tragedy and comedy and all that lies between. All human endeavor is in some sense time-bound, but at the same time, great work is overarching.

Present-day trends or even fads can actually be traced back to the beginnings of Modernist experiments in western intellectual life when Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theories had an influence on how authors were read. Surrealism explored the fantasies to which the human imagination was prone, the followers of Karl Marx undermined confidence in

capitalism and market economics, and schools of thought such as the Italian Futurists found value in what was violent or ugly. The Romantic Era poet, John Keats, could write in his “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (1819) that,

Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

But in the early decades of the twentieth century, extending to the present, asking for beauty in human affairs was hardly paramount. In sum, it was not only that many educated tastes no longer centered on the humanities. It was also the case that the humanities were pursuing agenda that did not attempt to cultivate educated taste for a wider public put off by arcane language and esoteric viewpoints, especially as these viewpoints insulted their motives and dignity.

THE CONDITIONS FOR BEING HUMAN

Basically, the humanities are inquiries into what is meant to be human, which in turn asks us to explore the facts of human nature, its possible essence, and the forms of education best suited to the task of evaluating the results of that exploration. For centuries scholars and philosophers but also historians and philologists have argued about whether in truth something termed human nature actually exists. The discussions have become deeper perhaps, or at least more puzzling, thanks to the entry of psychology, neurobiology and artificial intelligence into ancient discussions. Often enough the earliest speculations were moral, or religiously moral. Were men and women innately good or wicked? Were they neither but born with an adaptive capacity? Were they able through history or conscious evolution to progress from barbarism to civilization? Many thinkers weighed in on this possible trajectory. It was notably discussed by the intellectuals of the Scottish Enlightenment who certainly influenced American education. The optimistic conclusion was that through experience and education people can improve themselves, gain in mental strength and reach desirable moral heights.

Two other broad references are necessary to round out this brief summary of human nature because they more directly lead us more completely to how the humanities were and can be taught. The first is to posit as did ancient philosophers such as Aristotle that human nature can only achieve its fullest development within some larger systems or institutions. For Aristotle and many coming after him, human nature requires a life led in cities, a word related to civilization, civility, citizenship and civic, words with Latin roots. People, added Aristotle, were happiest and most fulfilled as active participants in urban affairs, but he meant people who enjoyed privilege and freedom in his time. Slaves and women, for examples, were not capable of citizenship.

At any rate, the belief that people require other people in order to be balanced or complete is also an assumption underlying economic determinism and the domains of anthropology. The qualities of being human are the social qualities and indeed the behavioral values that belong to the group as a whole. The degree of personal freedom and independence

of mind depends on the family, the tribe, the polity, the nation, the larger values, singular or plural. Constraints always exist. Learning to cope, shape or change them depends upon how others respond. The means for transforming the culture of a society can be evolutionary or violent. Or perhaps change is simply not an option. Salvatore Puledda (1997), in a thoughtful discussion of “on being human,” names thinkers of the twentieth century who see no possibility of change. They notice only the darker recesses of human nature. The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss sees only a primitive side to mankind. The ability of human beings to improve their condition is impossible because humans are the products of structures that restrict choice and freedom, as well as the forces of the unconscious identified by psychologists like Sigmund Freud. These forces, such as psychosis and neuroses, are hidden fears that interfere with a rational plan for improvement. The Lévi-Strauss structuralists or the Existentialists have been influenced by certain forms of scientific thinking. Men and women are not separate from other forms of life. They are made of the same outer-space chemicals as plants and animals. They are subject to the same evolutionary processes that affect all living creatures. Life is ultimately a struggle for survival. Beyond that there is no meaning that the humanists can identify. No essential human nature exists. There are only the conditions of existence. And the struggle for existence requires rebellion against all forms of authority, even if such rebellion leads to mayhem or death. Merely to exist may require action, and action need not have a goal beyond affirmation of oneself. The Futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti came to similar conclusions, even justifying and exalting war itself or outrightly courting danger.

The problem of “modernity,” to use a vague but useful word, is the loss of a moral reason to expose evil. The distinctions between good and bad have vanished, and in their loss comes any possibility of living together according to rules and codes. Even the conventional unflattering exposures of the pathologies of human affairs are not quite so chilling, so forlorn, so much filled with animus towards any assumption of a positive side to human nature, or even the existence of a definable human nature, as are the writings of many twentieth-century thinkers. But there were forerunners warning us of troubles to come. Several early modern intellectuals sounded a pessimistic note, explaining, as did Thomas Hobbes, why human freedom was cannibalistic, fratricidal and anarchical. Before him Machiavelli examined the pernicious doctrine of *raison d'état*, justifying the use of force and cruelty by states in order to achieve political stability. A combination of Hobbesian thinking and the modernist undermining of all moral bonds is what particularly troubles moralists like the former Chief Rabbi of Britain, Jonathan, Lord Sacks (2020),.

One can contrast ancient with modern authors in this respect: ancient writers were well aware of human tendencies towards destructive behavior and wrote frequently of wicked deeds, political dysfunction and populations easily misled. Medieval Christian writers chronicled the killings and crimes of rulers. Heroes were often mountebanks. But often enough such a tabulation of evil-doing had a moral purpose. History is philosophy teaching by example said Henry St John, Viscount Bolingbrook in the early eighteenth century. Exposing human folly was the first step towards the betterment of society.

While historians have never been reluctant to list the crimes committed by people, the global wars of the twentieth century, the rise of murderous totalitarian regimes, the unimaginable slaughter of innocent people for no other reason than hatred and domination, the first uses of atomic weapons in warfare, fears of climate change and environmental pollution have strengthened the arguments of those who see no possibility of human improvement. This is the formidable and possibly leading challenge of a humanistic education, of a different order of magnitude and of greater concern than preparation for careers. If the humanities are in “crisis,” as many writers proclaim, it is because society itself is in “crisis,” and humanists have lost faith in their ability to offer encouragement and perspective.

HUMANISM AND INDIVIDUALISM

Sigmund Freud was mainly concerned with the psychological conditions of the patients whom he saw as individuals. Some thinkers have attempted to apply psychological assessments to entire groups or societies, or even to combine Marx and Freud, exploring the impact of technology on social change and the character of mass culture.² The results, while provocative are not always convincing. Nevertheless, the attempts to reach conclusions about collective human behavior continues, especially with respect to voting in free societies or popular entertainment.

There is a mainstream strand of individualism affecting the purpose of the humanities that is historical and not a theory. It goes by various names, most prominently termed “liberal individualism” because “liberal” is related to “liberty.” In English medieval history a “liberty” was a territory protected from the authority of the monarch, such as an ecclesiastical institution. In the tortuous descent from its medieval origins to the more modern periods, “liberty” still retained a sense of place, or property, but the word broadened to mean “natural rights,” the freedoms that individuals possessed simply by being human. And in this meaning “natural rights” became a leading article of the constitutional basis of the American Republic. These rights were “inalienable,” i.e., they could never be taken away because individuals were born with them, “endowed” by their Creator in the language of the eighteenth century.

The political purpose of liberal individualism was to limit the power of the state. But at virtually the same time liberal individualism assumed an economic character, notably in the writings of English economists. Different designations have been assigned to liberal individualism. It is sometimes called “possessive individualism” to align it with capitalism or the “selfish philosophy,” focusing on struggle and self-gain at the expense of others. The leading characteristic of *homo economicus*, the economists argued, is self-interest. Individuals are the best judges of their own welfare and should be free of all external interference in order to exercise what is a natural right. But what if my right to pursue what is best for me conflicts with your right to do the same? How is conflict to be avoided? The answer rests upon a paradox. Conflict cannot be completely avoided in the short run, but in the long run a harmonization of

interests somehow occurs. While this outcome cannot always be absolutely demonstrated, unquestionably it has stimulated personal ambition and enterprise, especially with respect to material gain. It continues to be a hotly-argued ideological issue in today's United States and anywhere else where individual initiative is believed to be thwarted by bureaucratic intervention.

The early nineteenth-century French visitor to a young America, Alexis de Tocqueville, observed in one of the most famous of all works of political field work that American individualism, energy and self-reliance were admirable. However, when left unrestrained, the consequence was little concern for the suffering of others. A morality of self-satisfaction could become a morality of blame, the successful accusing the unsuccessful of lacking ambition and self-respect.

An extreme version of liberal individualism is found within the Romantic Movement of the early nineteenth century. Romantics considered the primary bonding institutions of society to be a handicap, detrimental to the realization of their true nature. A particular target was the city, the same city that Aristotle posited as an essential setting for human happiness. When humans are massed together, the creative individual finds himself or herself unappreciated. Loneliness or withdrawal from society is then one means of avoiding the stultifying effects of dwelling under the constraints imposed by numbers. But withdrawal never works. Innumerable novels have as a protagonist the wanderer who no longer finds a place for himself in the normal world where success matters. The mid-nineteenth-century opera by Jacques Offenbach, *The Tales of Hoffmann*, based on the stories of the German Romantic E.T.A. Hoffmann, portrays a poet who seeks inspiration by falling in love with imagined or sickly women. He never acquires a perspective on reality. Graham Greene creates such an alienated outcast in the character of the architect Querry. He finds himself in an African leper colony desperately searching for a useful role in life. "Self-expression is a hard and selfish thing. It eats everything, even the self. In the end you find that you haven't even got a self to express." (Greene, p. 46)

POLARITIES

Lord Sacks believes that an extreme interpretation of liberal individualism is the foremost social pathology of contemporary society. He and others dispute the ramifications of liberal individualism. It is not a healthy state of affairs, they conclude, but is it nonetheless the way humans are created? Is the achievement of a full humanity really conditioned by neurological or evolutionary conditions? But science and evolutionary anthropology, they argue, have not proven that we are "hard-wired" to only seek our personal welfare. The opposite is in fact the truth. People are "naturally" predisposed to sharing, to helping one another, and this constitutes a moral obligation. We need one another to live full and responsible lives. The message needs reiterating because modern men and women are ignoring a "natural" fact of existence. They have lost their moral gyroscope, their better selves.³

These controversial polarities continue to separate American thinkers, journalists, politicians and concerned members of the reading public. Undoubtedly if not in the same way, similar polarities can be found in other nations. In the U.S. they find immediate outlets in the angry political debates regarding the role of government, the market and freedom in human affairs. At their best, the debates identify the positive aspects of self-help. At their worst, the debates are thoughtless, rote assertions of prejudices. Defenders of a humanistic education have long asserted that the humanities are but also must be deeply concerned with human actions and decisions. How they are taught then becomes uppermost. The largest question is one associated with liberal education in general. Can courses in the humanities actually stimulate a moral concern for others. Are they pathways to a better life, and can we actually measure both the short and the long-run consequences of humanistic study as intertwined with lives and careers? A further and more mundane question is whether the claims for a humanities education are only rhetorically defensive, an understandable position taken by members of an academic discipline more concerned with advancing particular forms of scholarship and the reputation that might follow than grappling with the pedagogy required to instill moral objectives in undergraduates.

There is however a further necessary point bearing upon the educational uses of the humanities. The legacies of liberal individualism, and especially in its Romantic forms, have led to an emphasis on self-realization as the endpoint of humanistic instruction. To study the humanities is to study the personal elements in our lives, how individuals are unique, how I am special (and should have a curriculum tailored to my special needs) and how, to use contemporary language, education is a commodity that we purchase for our own use. Such an endpoint is not however to be scorned. Insofar as respect for oneself is a condition of well-being, arguments for the humanities as a body of subjects focused on individual self-formation has merit. However, while necessary, it is not sufficient. A fuller grasp of our human dimensions must not focus entirely on oneself but on what it means to live in a larger world of varied, common and divergent “attitudes.” This is the word favored by a current school of “New Humanists,” meaning that it is not a philosophy but a practical response to the importance of getting along in a world of great ethnic diversity and differences in how to meet the challenges of living.⁴

THE HUMANITIES CURRICULA IN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

The foregoing discussion is intended to identify present-day issues in the teaching of the humanities, considering those disciplines from the perspective of what it means to be human. From the darker perspective of the modernist authors whom I have mentioned, there is no point in teaching anything humanistic because an essential human nature is either intractable or non-existent. If the humanities are intended to realize our truest or finest human potential,

the effort is absurd. However, from another perspective, the humanities have a vital part to play in educating us for lives of meaning and substance. The next step is therefore to mention again what the ends of a humanistic education might be and which of the many versions have special relevance for today. The last step would be to outline the content of a humanistic education taking into account centuries of argument and counter-argument.

The ends of a humanistic education have been discussed so often that the choices are many, some perhaps more realizable than others, some vague but uplifting, others personal and many that are social. Citizenship was the ends desired by ancient republican societies and is today avidly discussed in American circles. An aesthetic goal was idealized in Renaissance Italy, meaning a delight in the polite arts of conversation, accompanied by a sense of beauty and pleasure in the human body. This took another turn in the centuries afterwards, when a conception of high culture entered the discourse, expressed by the Victorian poet Matthew Arnold as “the best that has been thought and said in the world.” Nineteenth-century German scholars equated culture with the finest intellectual and artistic productions of an age, or of their nation. Others have spoken of a return to understanding morality, to modify or even replace the self-regarding philosophies of liberal individualism. In the New Humanism, the simple fact of understanding one another takes precedence. And of late, propelled by the apparent secondary place of the humanities in educating undergraduates, and the requirements of labor markets, the humanities have been praised for skills and proficiencies: critical reading and oral skills, the ability to understand and work with cohorts, sound decision-making. In short, the defense of the humanities today rests on their occupational utility. These objectives are not to be disparaged. They fit within the parameters of technical and problem-solving civilizations (health, environmental concerns, housing, security, family support), yet they fall far short of the loftier goals related to living or public service carried by the older traditions. That in itself would not be important were it not for the fact that the humanities aimed higher and promised greater outcomes.

But what exactly are the humanistic disciplines? I mentioned these at the outset, but here is a fuller statement. Historically, at least from the Renaissance onwards, philology or the reading and understanding of texts was the leading discipline. Languages, particularly classical languages, painting, the creative arts, history, music some elements of architecture – whatever touched upon the arts of living, and an appreciation of beauty – fell within the broad categories. In the Anglophone countries of the twentieth century, what was once encompassed by philology became better known as literary criticism. Many of the debates over the purpose of the humanities have centered on the teaching of literature, especially until recently literary works or works in history understood as literature and denominated “the great books” or the literary “canon.” Designing a great books curriculum was once a standard feature of introductory courses in literature, but the list of readings has grown so large that no student can touch upon more than a miniscule sample.⁵ But the point is to keep alive the very idea of

works of human creativity that go well beyond ordinary achievements and carry special moral and intellectual heft.

Within colleges and universities, the undergraduate curriculum is typically divided into four or five knowledge domains, but this is a taxonomic convenience, an attempt to maintain the attenuated principle of a liberal or rather a general education requiring undergraduates to have some exposure to subjects within divisions that are not always clearly separated from one another. Logic as taught in philosophy departments is sometimes mathematics. History is often listed as a social science, and words like “cross-disciplinary” or “interdisciplinary” or “multidisciplinary” have come into use to indicate the confusion that exists whenever disciplinary boundaries are rigidly defined. In sum, we are today experiencing a knowledge explosion that no longer allows the kinds of separation between academic specialties that have created the American undergraduate curriculum.

However, disciplinary specialization cannot be avoided. Knowledge is subdivided into discrete elements to avoid superficiality. Specialism underpins the strength of modern societies since complexity not simplicity is the truth of the human experience and nature itself. Disparaging this fact, as is the habit of those who denounce specialization in favor of some conception of “general education,” serves no purpose. It may in fact be said that the very process of reasoning itself leads inevitably into the details and minutiae of any subject. So yet another challenge for the humanities is how to meld the specific to the general, how to force specialized knowledge into the service of overarching forms of thought.

THE “BAROQUE MIND”

Sociologists like Robert Burton Clark (1993 and 2006) have explained how in practice disciplines do in fact move sideways into adjacent fields of inquiry. History is an easy example, since historians employ the methods and insights of all disciplines, but literary criticism has also long borrowed from other areas of the curriculum, from psychology or philosophy or anthropology and sociology. The professions benefit from plural approaches. Clinical social welfare practitioners understand that they must be aware of how legal systems work. They need to patrol the labyrinth of government bureaucracies, be acquainted with the structure of families, be alert to the consequences of crime and the nature of policing and, perhaps above all, have some grasp of the underlying moral and behavioral values within the societies in which they work. City planners draw from engineering, art history, design, architecture, concepts of space and how space is perceived and used by people. Some understanding of fundamental economics is also a requirement.

Expertise at undergraduate level is not the issue, but awareness of how disciplines interpenetrate is a necessity. Newer trends are demonstrating how the strengths of humanistic learning are connecting to other disciplines and breaking out of an organizational pattern that is undergoing transformations. Educationally, we could call this the awakening of curiosity or a cast of mind or outlook. The cast of mind might also be termed “baroque,” using the word for forms of art that are never complete in themselves but are restless, constantly provoking the

viewer to go beyond what is seemingly apparent, hinting at depths and complexity. In the history of architecture, a building with a baroque façade is restless, even disturbing, while, to make a jejeune contrast, a classical frontage is settled, straightforward, comfortable. The same analogy occurs with respect to circles and open circles, one complete in itself, the other suggesting distances and mysteries that lie outside the interrupted required outline.

Nineteenth-century German academics promoted the concept of *Einheit des Wissens*, the unity of all knowledge. The ideal remains. To be narrow in understanding or servile, as the ancient Greeks said, meant that one's humanity was unrealized. Here is precisely the entering point for the humanities, for instead of being simply disciplines protecting their academic boundaries, they are in fact partners in the broad tasks of both problem-solving and living worthwhile lives.

DEPARTURES FROM THE CONVENTIONAL TAXONOMY OF THE HUMANITIES

While the division of an undergraduate curriculum into broad taxonomic categories has been the dominant feature of undergraduate course structures in the United States, departures from this conventional pattern are in fact notable, although undergraduates are not always the principal recipients. Within research universities Interdisciplinary "institutes"⁶ or centers sit side-by-side with departments, drawing from the same faculty, sometimes offering courses, research collaborative work and at other times lectures by visiting scholars. While there are distinct funding reasons for these interdisciplinary units, they also exist to allow scholars with common field interests to unite in a setting different from that of a department. "Core" undergraduate programs or compulsory courses for entering undergraduates exist around the United States, even some featuring the ideal of "great books." Especially noteworthy are the celebrated St John's Colleges of Annapolis, Maryland and Santa Fe, New Mexico where undergraduates are taught in seminars extending over the life of their degree preparation. The great books list includes classic works in philosophy, literature, political science, psychology, history, religion, economics, math, chemistry, physics, biology, astronomy, music, language, and more.

Columbia College at Columbia University in New York City offers a core described as the "cornerstone" of their college education. Known as "Contemporary Civilization," the core dates back to 1919 where the focus was on war and peace issues influenced by the first of the world wars of the twentieth century. Additional cores were added in 1937, 1947, 1990 and 2004, all in the small class or seminar format. The central mission of the cores is "to provide all students with wide-ranging perspectives on significant ideas and achievements in literature, philosophy, history, music, art, and science." And beyond these perspectives? "The skills and habits honed by the Core – careful observation, close analysis, effective argument, imaginative comparison, and respect for a variety of ideas – provide a rigorous preparation for life as an engaged citizen in today's complex and changing world." These are large and worthy objectives, but absent

from the wording, if not possibly from the actual teaching, are the moral concerns expressed by others and advocacy for the "higher culture" which was also a principal inheritance.⁷ Faculty will always sharply disagree on the exact subject matter of an essential core; and cores are re-thought as circumstances change.

Another trend, not dissimilar to Columbia College but featuring add-ons rather than requirements are what are termed "Big Ideas" courses. At the University of California, Berkeley two or even three faculty members drawn from radically different fields join together to offer undergraduate teaching on a theme. Recent examples of such themes are Art and Ecology, combining art practice, the history of art and geography; Collaborative Innovation, combining business, theater and dance and public policy; Magic, Religion and Science, joining together Middle Eastern languages and culture and history; and Sense and Sensibility⁸ and Science, combining physics, psychology and philosophy. Like a number of other state universities, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst has an Honors College for intellectually-curious students. The College offers interdisciplinary discussion seminars for undergraduates on "innovative thinkers, groundbreaking ideas and the strategies that transform these ideas into effective actions." The focus of this and other listings are grandly proclaimed to be "Ideas that Change the World." Cambridge University has just announced a new "Tripos" (the Cambridge name for an undergraduate degree program). The Design Tripos unites architecture, engineering and materials science, suggesting new ways to understand some of the pressing global issues of today: social and environmental issues, poverty and climate change.

THE TEACHING OF HUMANITIES IN SCHOOLS OF TECHNOLOGY

I noted that the boundaries between different types of institutions is now a common fact. While particular institutions will retain their fundamental academic missions, so that engineering universities will still focus on engineering, it is fascinating to see how many have introduced teaching unrelated to their first and primary missions. It is, for example, heartening to read in letters to the editors of major newspapers that today's better business schools are not to be spurned as merely "trade schools" but have a substantial liberal arts component (*The Wall Street Journal*, November 16, 2021, p. A16).

A Department of the history of science and technology exists within the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm, Sweden. While the subject matter certainly appears pertinent to the mission of an engineering institution, it can hardly stand in its mainstream. Furthermore, once the history of any subject is introduced, the subject itself "takes over" so to speak, going in directions existing within the discipline wherever it is taught. The Imperial College, London, another celebrated engineering establishment, now also training medical personnel, has been teaching humanities courses since the 1950s through such venues as the Blythe Centre, the

Centre for Academic English, the Science Communication Unit and the Centre for Languages, Culture and Communication. "From small beginnings, the cultural and intellectual life of the College continues to be enriched by this varied offering to our students."⁹

Another outstanding European engineering establishment, ETH Zurich¹⁰, has a Department of Humanities, Social and Political Sciences. Yet another high-level engineering establishment, The Technion in Haifa, Israel, promotes a Humanities and Arts program. The stated object "is not to provide mere intellectual enrichment;¹¹ rather we seek to add essential facets that are missing in the typical engineer's training." The Technion's statement becomes even bolder. "[T]he very character of contemporary science...cannot be well understood without some background as to how and why modern science emerged in the 17th century....[T]he present divide in our medical institutions and its training methods, between physiology on the one hand and psychology on the other, cannot be fully grasped without attending to René Descartes's distinction between bodies (seen as extended things) and minds (seen as thinking things)."¹²

The California Institute of Technology, an outstanding scientific establishment in Southern California, also provides instruction in the social sciences. Another premier American technical university, and one of the most highly ranked research universities in the world, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, Massachusetts, provides courses in "global languages," architecture (which can straddle lines between philosophy, aesthetics and ethics), anthropology (listed as a "humanities" course whereas most often considered a social science), political science, literature, music and theater and gender and women's studies. Still another important American technical institution, Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, contains the Dietrich College of Humanities and Social Sciences. The College is described in its website as being an unusual type of liberal arts school, offering courses in creative writing, neuroscience, economics and others in a desire to "investigate and solve real-world problems."

Even when a technical institution grants only graduate degrees, the principle of offering opportunities for placing technological training into a wider context appears to have gained strength since at least the late twentieth century. This certainly offers ample possibilities for the subjects deemed humanities, provided, of course, that professors of humanities are themselves alert to those possibilities, now including a vast range of digital specialties. So much of today's cultural environment is permeated with consumer hype that one is likely to be skeptical of some of the promising course listings, but the effort to find alternatives to departmental

specialization even if only for a year or two of the student's higher education experience is a virtue. The mere listing of these combinations is not an adequate guide to the content, but that is beside the point. The principle of knowledge connections is being recognized. An inestimable byproduct of these jointly-shared pedagogical innovations is that faculty are able to meet one another outside their customary academic settings.

It is of course impossible to know exactly how many students entering a technical or medical profession have actually broadened a grasp of their specialty through exposure to courses in the humanities and arts. Nor is it ever possible to know with certainty how personal lives have been transformed by efforts to connect the many facets of knowledge and instill a "baroque" way of thinking. But if a goal is worthy, it deserves attention. As Shakespeare's Prince of Denmark, Hamlet, states in another context, "the readiness is all."

WHOLE AGAIN

In *The Art of Being Human, The Humanities as a Technique for Living*, two authors state the positive case for studying the humanities in the broadest possible terms. "[T]he humanities," they write, speaking of the arts, religion and philosophy, "are the accumulated record of what humankind has done with its humanness. They are not as distinct from the sciences as educators in the past have made them appear (for both involve rational powers), but they sum up a greater number of concerns than do the sciences, even as they afford us insights into processes which the sciences, except for psychology, generally have no time to consider: processes like creativeness and intuition." [Given disciplinary boundary leakage, this would not be my opinion.] And they reiterate what has been one of the foremost claims for the humanities, that they fulfill a human need for completeness (1984).

To my mind, the question of "a human need for completeness" is indeed the crux of the matter as I discussed in an essay on "The Limbs of Osiris," the disjointed elements of self and social understanding begging for reunion (1993, 2006). I could also call this the Ezekiel Principal in a reference to the Hebrew prophet who foretold that discrete dry bones would one day be conjoined to make people whole again. However, as I have been suggesting, it is doubtful whether one branch of learning can bring about such a resurrection without the assistance of the others, even though it is impossible for an undergraduate to obtain any great depth in any one branch. From the discussions in this essay it should be apparent that while the humanities will not be the only range of disciplines represented in a course on Big Ideas, they are essential to its success. But for the humanities to be major allies, its advocates have to overcome the immense pessimistic overload incurred in the course of the last century. This should not be mistaken for saying that there is no value to understanding the darker side of the human experience. On the contrary, discussions of the tragic dimensions of the history of humankind are almost "the one thing needful," an area of inquiry into which the humanities can be supremely enlightening. A sense of proportion demands that the unpleasant dimensions of human behavior be noted and put into their broadest possible context, past and present. While the world requires an educated class equipped with specific problem-solving and

communication skills, it also requires a holistic view of human potential and achievement so that education indeed becomes the critical link to the “art of living.”

Decades ago, the Princeton University scholar Walter Kauffmann, in a response to the “crisis of the humanities,” explained how a particular set of religious texts could be used to provide a rounded view of the human experience. (1977). Religion has often trod a rocky path in the history of the humanities because Renaissance scholars thought of the humanities as “earthly” rather than “sacred” studies, reacting to the otherworldliness teaching of Roman Catholicism. But religion, as Kauffmann demonstrates, has always been central to the human experience. Any discussion of religion touches upon evidence for belief, the rituals and organization of religious practice, a concern for the welfare of the faith community, a grasp of the human imagination, a sociology of religious leadership and its conflicts or cooperation with political authority, cosmological questions that involve a scientific or metaphysical understanding of natural phenomena, the psychological and emotional accompaniments of belief, and the economic ramifications of diverting assets to religious institutions. Art and architecture enter the story, for so many of the greatest achievements of religious belief have been buildings and art, the form, beauty and scale of which attract millions of tourists to this day.

The passage into this extraordinary world of multiple layers, Kauffmann suggested, is through the study of principal texts in the comparative history of religion, and the debates encountered within those texts: the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, the Dhammapada, a collection of sayings of the Buddha; the Bhagavad-Gita, the Upanishads, the Laws of Manu and Rigveda of Hinduism; the Analects of Confucius ;and the Laws of Manu and the Tao-Teh-Ching of the Taoists. Going beyond these texts, in themselves the study of entire civilizations, also allows inquiry into the history of polytheism or Zoroastrianism.

Big Ideas courses are not exactly new. Over forty years ago Mortimer Adler identified six worthy primary ideas in need of elaboration: truth, goodness, beauty, liberty, equality, justice (Adler (1981, 1984). Other subjects can be made to fulfill similar objectives, subjects already appearing in Big Ideas courses, such as the earth-shaking, on-going impact of technology; war, the sad default position of humankind; or the story of Reason, which takes us from centuries of otherworldly and early attempts to make sense of experience, to the debates over epistemology (how do we know anything?) to the brain sciences of today. The benefits of such approaches can be summarized as follows. First, the humanities do not lose their position as illustrations of human capacity but join with all the other disciplines to achieve the ideal of the unity of knowledge. Second, a comparative perspective allows for both a specific and a universal comprehension of what it means to be human. Each specific example sheds light on the others. Third, as the multiple disciplines contribute to a reading of the whole, each one is required to defend its canons of proof, how evidence is used and how simple and dangerous it is to allow personal and ideological points of view to carry the inquiry. And because this temptation is always present in the pursuit of knowledge, a fourth element is that collaborative teaching allows each instructor to both assist and correct the others. The “course” I have in mind for undergraduates depends upon the structure of teaching in different universities, but I

would propose a year-long undergraduate experience, full-time, before releasing students to pursue chosen specialities.

In sum, it is time to cease “defending” the humanities, time to stop whining about a “crisis,” time to limit academic jargon and gibberish in the reading of works of literary and artistic achievement, time to return to explaining the methods of proof and logic that advance knowledge. It is time to provide students with the mental resources that allow for independent judgement and critical perception, helping them to a reasonable state of confidence that the disciplined intelligence is not befuddled by the howling confusions of the world. Ignorance has always been the enemy of emotional and social stability. Ambiguities will nevertheless remain, doubts as well, but they are the “normal” facets of living. Perspective and balance: surely the bodies of learning that we denote “humanities” are capable of providing these? And finally, students will come to the realization that living fruitfully requires a measure of healthy self-understanding. This rests upon knowledge. Together they achieve that total sense of self in relation to society that makes them human.

NOTES

1. Examples being the Hungarians György Lucács or Arnold Hauser.
2. The so-called Frankfurt School of thinkers, German intellectuals who escaped the Nazis and ended up at American universities. Amongst them are Leo Lowenthal, Herbert Marcuse, Jürgen Habermass, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer.
3. Our deeply-buried better selves in need of recovery in the language of the nineteenth-century poet, Matthew Arnold.
4. “Silo” (Mario Rodríguez Cobos), Argentine founder of the New Humanism.
5. Mortimer Adler identified 137 “great books” in 1972.
6. A word with several meanings, and in Europe often equated with departments.
7. “Institute” often means “department” in European universities
8. Columbia University (College) website
9. An allusion to the famous novel by the nineteenth-century writer Jane Austen.
10. Imperial College Website, “Seventy Years of Humanities Celebrated at the College in March 2020. The program opened with the Imperial String Quartet playing Mozart.
11. Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule)
12. Although “mere intellectual enrichment” is itself an achievement.
13. Website for Technion.

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