

WHAT ARE THE HUMANITIES?

One of a series on this subject at Memorial University, October 26, 1999

The urge to ask Socratic questions suggests concepts under stress. When Plato asked, 'What is justice?' in the *Republic* and 'What is knowledge?' in the *Theaetetus*, the Sophists were effectively challenging notions of natural right and objective knowledge. The need to ask, 'What are the Humanities?' occurs in a social context dominated by hectic commerce rather than leisurely conversation. Science and engineering are advantaged in this situation, leaving a 2500-year-old legacy of literate civilization on the periphery of academic endeavour where the humanities= apparent lack of cash value may make them seem frivolous distractions from the important business of life.¹

I

The perils of the humanities have been often been identified in this way. They result from a style of civilization one typical reflection of which is provided by Jean-Francois Lyotard in his *Report on Knowledge*:

The relationship of the suppliers and users of knowledge to the knowledge they supply and use is now tending, and will increasingly tend, to assume the form already taken by the relationship of commodity producers and consumers to the commodities they produce and consume..... Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange. Knowledge ceases to be an end in itself....²

This is especially bad news for humanistic knowledge, whose exchange value seems small in contrast to that enabling the production of computer chips, satellite communications, and designer drugs.

An obvious reply is that the true value of an education in the humanities may not be instantly apparent but becomes evident upon examination. The humanities are a source of high-level intellectual skills that are widely applicable. Learning to communicate clearly and concisely, to read and listen critically, to organize and make effective use of time, in short, learning how to learn are abilities honed in studying the humanities, and these are the very skills that contribute crucially to commercial success in a modern nation.

But this reply has an obvious shortcoming. It accepts the terms of argument that represent a diminished view of knowledge. In so doing, the pragmatic defence of the humanities proves ineffective. The audience for which the message is designed is unreceptive. To be sure, it is a simple matter to produce anecdotes in which corporate presidents praise the skills that humanists bring to their enterprises, but the advice does not appear to reach down to their recruitment officers who need people to perform particular, technical jobs right now.

It is also easy to compile lists of B.A.s who have enjoyed great corporate success and to

assemble statistics about the healthy salaries and employment rates of humanities graduates. I did so myself while a dean of humanities. However, these data, I found, do not much diminish a sense of guilt experienced by many humanities students when asked by their colleagues in business and engineering why they waste their time on unprofitable pursuits (leaving aside, of course, the commercial value of knowledge of other languages and cultures). These doubts are not assuaged if apologists for the humanities stress critical thinking over the treasures of civilization. Doing so makes it much more difficult to choose the humanities over business or engineering.

Critical and creative thinking are not peculiar to the study of the humanities. The natural and social sciences and the professional disciplines also stress the development of analytical abilities, valid reasoning, good oral and written communication, and skills of inquiry generally. In manifesting these skills themselves, humanists have to be wary of the desperate contention that they develop or possess them in pre-eminent degree. So, too, for the suggestion that the intellectual skills refined in the humanities represent the core of higher education. The evidence for such propositions is elusive, for which reason a serious effect of the contention may be to isolate the humanities from the rest of the academy.

These reflections lead me to the thesis that higher education aims at mastery of a discipline or disciplines and the capacity to explore connections between them. With this mastery comes a set of skills: the capacity to formulate appropriate questions, the ability to assemble and evaluate evidence bearing upon the answers, sensitivity to the possibility that alternative answers are worth considering and that often there is no single right answer. No discipline or group of disciplines has a monopoly on these by-products of learning, and their generic character tells us little about particular families of disciplines or what they are about. Let us therefore look more closely at our leading question.

II

Wittgenstein suggested that one's grasp of a concept is shown by the examples one can give of it. Hence, the question, What are the Humanities?, can be answered by enumeration: art, drama, music, history, literature, poetry, philosophy, and the like. This form of explication lacks the Socratic burden of displaying the principle of unity that defines likeness in these cases, which is a good thing. For Plato, poetry and philosophy were profoundly contrasted modes of thinking, but for us they can be items in a coherent set of practices between which we discern certain family resemblances.

We don't have to suppose that there is a principle of unity amongst the humanities in order to make some general observations about them. I have already characterized the humanities as a 2500-year-old legacy of literate civilization. They are a source of social continuity - a set of reflections upon a way of life - but also a source of social change and improvement, since they challenge questionable conventions. They concern themselves with human affairs and intentions rather than the world of things that form the objects of scientific curiosity, including the objects of the social sciences that (at least when positivistically inclined) attempt to examine human

beings as things rather than ends-in-themselves. In so far as the humanities treat human beings as ends rather than means to ends, they have an ethical dimension that makes them similar to such professional arts such as law, medicine, social work, and even business and engineering.

To these general characterizations can be added the fact that a humanist's basic tools are texts. The basic work is writing, talking, and expressing, whether in words, musical scores or visual images. In order to succeed one has to be articulate, which reminds us of the all-too-charming fact that the humanities disciplines also include intellectual skills of high order, critical and creative thinking. But we should not assume that all instances of such thinking consist of some one thing. To the contrary, the specific virtues of thinking in the various areas of the humanities differ in interesting ways.

Historians learn to treat sources judiciously, weigh fallible and falsifiable data accurately, gain sensitivity to the unique features of particular cases, and develop a capacity to make reasonable inductive inferences on the basis of logically inconclusive evidence.

Students of literature become expert in analogy and comparison. In order to master a work of imagination, one has to be able to find unstated connections and explore new metaphors. These are inventive activities that promote creative and lateral thinking.

The best philosophers are distinguished by rigorously logical thinking. They favour carefully defined concepts and discourage analogical and inductive arguments as deductively invalid. In so doing they display formidable powers of detecting fallacies and questionable assertions.

Like the humanities themselves, these skills display family resemblances, but they are specialized rather than general capacities, and they are not obviously transferrable. This limitation was part of Plato's point about the conflict between literature and philosophy. These are different ways of thinking, not all-purpose skills. Hence, good philosophers are not necessarily good historians or good historians good literary critics.

It may be misleading advertising to say that higher education fosters abilities to reason and communicate across the university curriculum. If this is our objective, then we do not know whether we are satisfying it, for we have not carefully explored the generalizability of skills across disciplines. There is plenty of evidence that critical thinking is no one thing. Educated people are capable of making outrageous claims about matters remote from their discipline, suggesting that critical thinking is discipline-bound. There is then no unity of the intellectual virtues.

If this is so, it is not necessarily matter for regret. A complex society will thrive on intellectual pluralism. To function well it will need its members to possess a wide variety of intellectual skills. And since these skills are by-products of inquiry into particular subject matters, a wide variety of objects of academic inquiry should be available. Each of them produces one thing of further value. Truth in advertising is preserved if we say that mastering a discipline is learning how to think in a disciplined way. Commercial organizations need such discipline.

Let me try to be clear. Nothing I have said counts against mastery or at least familiarity with more than one discipline. The study of any of the humanities is enriched by exposure to other subjects and by interdisciplinary wrestling with problems that deserve attention from many perspectives. Moreover, all academic studies display many commonalities, including the resolution of tensions and anomalies, insistence upon reasonable inferences, and the identification of good evidence. But we are not justified in equating the tensions studied in a novel with the contradictions abhorred by philosophers, or assuming that there is a single canon of reasonableness across fields, or supposing that the same evidence is everywhere admissible. Critical, creative, disciplined thinking takes diverse forms.

III

What are the humanities? The only occasions on which we are uncertain are those on which we ask the question. Otherwise we know that they consist in art, drama, music, history, literature, poetry, philosophy, and the like. We know in turn what these are from examples of their texts, their eminent personages, and the questions they try to answer. This knowledge is not the grasp of essences, for each discipline is itself a family of resemblances. What counts as history, for example, displays the remarkable variation of Herodotus, Thucydides, Marx, Vico, and so on. Despite this variation, classification does occur, identifying sites of intellectual excitement.

This is the excitement on which Aristotle remarked when he said that all people by nature desire to know. He meant that people whose sense of wonder is aroused are motivated to learn for the sake of learning rather than extraneous reasons, such as vocational opportunities, however important they may be as well. Their objective is knowledge as an end in itself.

If one's pursuit of education is motivated by aims other than learning and the mastery of a discipline - for example, by vocational aspirations that require the credential of a university degree - then the achievement of that credential can take precedence over the satisfaction of wonder. A likely consequence is that students will be less adept at the intellectual discipline that society seeks than they are when these skills arise from the pursuit of knowledge directly.

It follows that we should always focus on the content of our disciplines rather than the skills they develop. Our first task as educators is to excite our students with the passion for learning and to distract them from excessive concern about what happens after university. If we do this then the habits of disciplined thinking will have been firmly laid, but we will not have given up on a view of knowledge as good in itself. Utilitarian considerations remain, but they are of the sort: what can we do to inspire wonder? This is an easy question: The best among us should teach in year one; we should all make ourselves professionally available to primary and secondary school students; we should cultivate the media rather than invite their incomprehension and ridicule through jargon-laden discourse.

It remains a good question whether these prescriptions can be efficacious in a society that depends as much upon knowledge as ours does. Of course, every society has this dependency.

Each generation rests upon knowledge that has been transmitted to it and which it advances. But as knowledge grows in this way it becomes less a privilege and more a necessity. Our society depends upon large numbers of its people being highly educated. It is probably no coincidence that mass education and anxiety about the humanities come together.

When academic knowledge was primarily for the privileged classes, they could pursue it without undue concern for their later prospects. When it is an economic necessity, its exchange value becomes dominant. The inherent value claimed by a passion for music or literature or classics then becomes difficult to discern and bourgeois concerns take over from gentlemanly pursuits. Those subjects will be of interest that help to identify sound social policy or bend the material world to human will.

The humanist's appropriate response is not to advertise the useful skills they develop. It is to expose students to books and films that survive visiting and revisiting. It is to engage them with the art and music whose inexhaustible delights eclipse daily tedium. It is to revel in the courage of literary protagonists and to understand the ambiguous legacies of historical agents. When taught with passion and commitment, the humanities change students' lives. Offered in this way they also develop what commercial society understands: demand for the product.

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Notes

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1. This discussion develops and corrects some ideas in my *Humanities: Frill or Major Force?*, @ *Bulletin of the Canadian Federation for the Humanities* (16,3: Winter 1994), pp. 4-6.
 2. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*(Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 5