De-Disciplining the Humanities

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The Seasons of our Discontent

Certainly, the University has discontents. Our students can verify that. To be an academic—even more, to be a humanities professor—is to be something of a professional discontent. We complain about—and to—our students, colleagues, and bosses; we exercise oedipal urges, slaughtering our intellectual forbearers (again and again: They just won't stay dead). Indeed, over the past couple of decades "transgressive thinking" has become a leitmotif (see, for example, J. P. Dennis's "Queers on the Tenure Track: Notes on the Civilization of Transgressive Sexualities in the Academy"). Limits, it seems, only exist in order to be overcome.

It is odd, then, that all this breaking of china usually stops at the edge of campus. One might think that tenure would have more of an effect. Once free from risk of retribution—with only the threat of a 2.5% rather than a 3% raise held over our heads—we humanists would seem set to become the embodiment of *intellectuels engagés*. For even if there are no more barricades to scale, there are thousands of venues for public speaking and plain writing about issues of crucial importance. Instead, we have overwhelmingly chosen another path: life as a professional chattering class, armored with shibboleths, disdainful of getting our hands dirty, pursuing infinite arguments set in language impenetrable to outsiders. Struggle with the slow, messy, real-life details necessary for integrating our points with the ongoing work of scientists, engineers, policy makers, or of groups in the public or private sectors? Instead, we expend our energies parsing the nuances separating the Maoists from the Trotskyites.

There *are* periodic attempts at rebirth. Take the phrase, "The New Humanities." Calls for a "New Humanities" go back in print to at least 1914. In an article called "New Humanities for Old," Felix Schelling exhorts readers of the Phi Beta Kappa journal to return the humanities to their rightful place: one of "splendid isolation from the possibility of measurement and appraisement by utilitarian standards" (184).

Lamenting careerism, increasing specialization, and the pursuit of material gain, Schelling argues that the "measure of the educational value of the humanities lies in their practical inutility" (182). He disdains Lord Bacon's redefinition of the humanities to include sciences, as well as the upheavals beginning in the mid nineteenth century (e.g., the development of the practical sciences and the creation of majors), calling instead for a return to the "lofty and unselfish ideals" of liberal education that "really do educate, elevate, and humanize" (184).

There is a lot to disentangle here. For instance, Schelling leaves unexplained why one would label education that elevates and humanizes the practitioner "useless"—or, if truly useless, why anyone would want to advocate its study. In fact, Schelling poses a false dilemma. It is certainly possible, for example, to condemn increasing specialization without advocating "splendid isolation"—and to reject utilitarian standards without dismissing the establishment of any external standards at all.

In the winter of 2008, nearly a full century later but with little change in rhetoric, the literary theorist Stanley Fish repeats Schelling's themes, insisting in his column in the *New York Times* that the humanities be divorced from all that is "useful":

> To the question "of what use are the humanities?" the only honest answer is none whatsoever. And it is an answer that brings honor to its subject. Justification, after all, confers value on an activity from a perspective outside its performance. An activity that cannot be justified is an activity that refuses to regard itself as instrumental to some larger good. The humanities are their own good (n. pag.).

One hears echoes here of Aristotelian metaphysics—the solitary glories of thought thinking itself. Legions of thinkers have puzzled themselves silly trying to understand Aristotle's claim; applied to Fish, what could this mean? That the humanities are their own good in the sense of, what, private amusement? Personal religious ecstasy? With no larger effect on the character of the individuals who study them, or on their students or associates? To paraphrase Fish, an activity that cannot be justified is an activity that had better have a rich patron.

In the end, Fish's stance comes down to that of an effete, and doubtless wealthy, aesthete—intellectually wanting, and more than a little condescending to mere mortals blind to the pleasures of Milton. Today, however, such an attitude is politically unsustainable—and all the more so in

an age of economic tribulation. The vast majority of institutions of higher learning, in the United States and across the globe, are publicly owned, and all—through student financial aid and government-sponsored scientific research—are to one degree or another publicly funded. Fish's rhetoric of the "only honest answer" is unlikely to find much sympathy among the citizens (and their representatives) who support universities because of their contributions to matters of common concern.

Offering justification for the humanities need not reduce us to Mr. Gradgrind's economic philosophy. Enjoy your quiet moment of contemplation—we certainly do. But in addition to the considerable pleasures attaching to such reflection, humanists can help people become more sensitive to the ethical dimensions of new and unfamiliar technologies, prompt a greater awareness of relevant past examples to present political debate, and awaken us to the possibility for beauty within our daily lives, as well as alert us to injustice through biting satire. This is, of course, not a complete list: Just within philosophy, aestheticians, epistemologists, philosophical psychologists, philosophers of history, philosophers of science, logicians, and metaphysicians all have real contributions to make to contemporary societal debates, on issues ranging from cloning to climate change.

Humanists in a Bureaucratic Age

What role, then, can the humanities play in contemporary society? Ours is not a call for the return of the philosopher-king—a role that has justly gone the way of the hoop skirt. The times call for something quite different: humanists involved in daily life on the project level. Rather than the philosopher-king, call it the philosopher-bureaucrat.

Now, "bureaucrat" is a term of near universal disapprobation. No one aspires to become a bureaucrat, the faceless functionary whose very existence offends our sense of individuality. Nonetheless, it remains a stubborn truth that we pass our lives within bureaucratic structures, and, despite constant battles with bureaucracies, we would have it no other way. Run amuck, they rightly inspire rebellion; but well-run bureaucracies are the embodiment of due process and the rule of law, offering certification that the food we eat and the products we count on have been vetted for purity and safety. Few of us would want to risk non-certified pharmaceuticals, or airplanes not safety-inspected.

Of course, the self-image of humanists has long been tied to romantic notions of the solitary artist. This image has its charms: genius

is an individualist concept, and there are few bureaucratic heroes. But it matches badly with the utter dominance of institutional structures today. Our lack of comfort with this fact explains the enduring nostalgia for the rugged individualist and its academic equivalent: the single-authored monograph by the lone scholar. We dream of being the hero of the American Western—riding into town like Shane, righting wrongs, then withdrawing again into the pristine wilderness. The Western evokes a Homeric world of self-determination and moral clarity, even as most of us are tied Gulliver-like to a thousand duties.

The trick is to avoid the blandishments of both the philosopher-king and the solitary isolate. Let us aim instead for the place where we might be able to do the most good—the meso-level of the humanist-bureaucrat, highlighting the ethics and values dimensions at the project level, aiming to influence decision-making processes, and having a seat at the table when the ethical, aesthetic, political, or metaphysical aspects of real-world problems are being neglected.

By way of example, consider climate change. The US government spends 2 billion dollars a year on climate change science (and has, since 1990). There is also, as part of this research, a small slice (around $50 million) devoted to the human dimensions of climate change. But almost all of this $50 million is devoted to economic analyses. The humanistic dimensions of the problem are marginalized. Climate change raises questions covering a wide range of issues, incuding justice: Are the people who created the problem also going to be the ones who suffer the consequences of climate change, or will the poor likely suffer disproportionally? Aesthetics: What effect will landscape change have on human culture, through the elimination of formerly native plants and animals? And the philosophy of technology: Should we focus on developing technological fixes to this problem, even though science and technology have played a powerful role in getting us in this mess? Or should we choose a softer path, seeking to control our desires rather than the world?

Other examples are easily identified. In the developing world, there is increasing concern about the ethical aspects of globalization and (over)development, expressed in the burgeoning field of development ethics. Now, topics like the ethical and cultural aspects of development are usually colonized by the descriptive languages of the social sciences. But that is as much a matter of humanists refusing to get their hands dirty as it is of a recalcitrant positivism. Getting one's hands dirty means not only writing papers on a subject, but also working to integrate humanistic ideas with people across the disciplines and outside of the academy. While less

romantic, this places humanists where they are most needed: at the project level, working with non-humanists on the task of integrating—or perhaps better said, insinuating—humanistic concerns into our quickly evolving culture. The fact that such activities open up new possibilities of employment is merely an added benefit for doing the right thing.

Contemporary Pressures, Traditional Biases

Humanists, and even scientists, ignore these points at their peril. For academics are not the only ones who are discontented. In the United States, Congress has made it clear that it is dissatisfied with the ivory-tower model of scientific research. Criticisms of "blue sky" research—the derisive term of art—have undermined the claim that scientific research should be Aristotelian in nature, or, as the phrase goes, "curiosity-driven." With so little money at stake, they have not yet turned their guns on the humanities; but organizations such as the National Science Foundation are under increasing scrutiny to demonstrate that basic scientific research does indeed contribute to economic growth and effective decision making.

This shift marks a change in underlying assumptions: In the US and elsewhere, the period between the end of World War II and the end of the Cold War was guided by what has come to be called the "linear hypothesis" concerning the relation between science and society. It was thought that allowing scientists the untrammeled pursuit of curiosity-driven research, with no attention paid to actual utility, was the best means for achieving the greatest possible amount of scientific advancement. These discoveries would become part of the reservoir of knowledge upon which society could draw for the creation of an endless stream of advances that would make life better, longer, and healthier.

Humanists also embraced the ideal of curiosity-based research, abandoning their traditional concern with broad and synoptic accounts of life—but without the promise of economic payoff. W. V. O. Quine, for decades the dean of American philosophy, famously rejected consideration of the "big" questions as the quaint concerns of the public unaware of the nature of mature philosophic research. And while there was a small amount of work done in what came to be called "applied" ethics—business ethics, environmental ethics, and bioethics—this research was, and remains, decidedly on the margins of philosophy, and is nearly non-existent in the other humanities disciplines.

There are a number of problems with the linear hypothesis: first, that there is a straight line between material possessions and

human happiness, or a direct relation between the discovery of knowledge and its proper use. There is also the naïve assumption that the increase of knowledge is always a good thing (cf. Dr. Faust and Dr. Frankenstein). But the larger point is that it is exceedingly difficult for the academy to turn outward toward the concerns of the world when it is wedded to an epistemological model that assumes the constant need for ever greater specialization and analytic detail. Such detail-mongering may be justified within the sciences; but in the humanities, once characterized by the broad sweep of their enquiry into the human condition, it is liable to become pernicious.

Consider what it has meant to be a humanist in the twentieth century. The humanities today operate at a level of abstraction and supposed "rigor" that precludes interactions with non-specialists. To be a humanist once meant to take a wide compass—to be inspired generalists providing accounts of the whole of human experience. In recent decades, it has meant dedication to private language games among initiates. Rather than "appreciation," an essentially democratic process, humanists have taken on the mode of scientists, developing their own high theory impenetrable to outsiders, occupying a realm far from the everyday world of mere mortals.

It is true that a new strand has recently developed within philosophy, calling itself "experimental philosophy" or "X-Phi." In December of 2007, Princeton philosopher Kwame Appiah authored a piece in the *New York Times* that described this movement, under the title of "The New New Philosophy." Appiah describes the "path-breaking" work of philosophers reading MRI brain scans to learn about how we puzzle out moral quandaries. He even cites the "Experimental Philosophy Anthem" that can be found on YouTube (you get to watch an armchair burn). But note the direction of the argument: "The study was conducted by a philosopher, as a philosopher, in order to produce a piece of . . . philosophy" (ellipsis in the original). Philosophers go out into the world as a *means*, in order to bring back a new type of data to continue their puzzle solving. Appiah ends by noting that

> although experiments can illuminate philosophical arguments, they don't settle them. . . . To sort things out, it seems, another powerful instrument is needed. Let's see—there's one in the corner, over there. The springs are sagging a bit, and the cushions are worn, but never mind. That armchair will do nicely. (n. pag.)

Compare this with Socrates, who spent his days in the marketplace, or Descartes, who communicated with scientists and queens.

There have been stirrings by those seeking to escape the *cul de sacs* of Schelling, Fish, and Appiah. Some of this work has adopted the label of the "New Humanities." Julie Thompson Klein described the new humanities as involving a twofold shift. On the one hand, they have spurred the development of new specializations emphasizing difference (the rise of ethnic, minority, and women's studies); and on the other, they have contributed to the blurring of formerly distinct genres (39). Stung by criticisms of intellectual insularity, these humanists sought to overcome biases that had marginalized both cultures and ways of knowing. Knowledge was mapped in new ways, as the work of humanists and social scientists began to bleed into one another—anthropologists speaking in narrative terms of plots and actors, and humanists judging things in terms of social authority, exchange, and hierarchy. This redrawing of lines led to the creation of new fields like environmental studies.

Another type of blurring occurred via responses to the development of new information and media technologies. Over the past ten years. humanists have explored aspects of new technologies, popular culture, non-text media, industrial design, and computational sciences. Cathy Davidson prefers the phrase "technohumanism" to highlight the processes through which the humanities both embrace and critique technology and new media. The advent of Web 2.0, where the internet is no longer simply the source of information but where users also introduce and modify content (think Wikipedia), raises far-reaching ethical, political, epistemological, and metaphysical questions. Has the internet broken the traditional bond between knowledge and authority?

We can also identify other, more extended, uses of the term. New accounts of the nature of cognition in the neurosciences are reshaping the way the humanities explain humanity. Here is genre-blurring at its most perplexing: The once lofty ideals of the humanities (nobility, virtue, the soul) are now explained in terms of feedback loops, conditioning, chemicals, and the stimulation of the prefrontal cortex. At the same time, from the Christian Right, humanists have been reconstructed as *bêtes noires* who politicize every subject of study and promote skepticism about truth and relativize all values. Pursuit of the humanities now means dispensing with human ideals as set forth by God and setting oneself up as a worldmaker—Nietzschean self-creators inventing personal ideals out of whole cloth.

While applauding these developments, we are concerned with the gravitational imperative that underlies these New Humanities—which

consists of sallies out into the world, which are quickly brought back to highlight new aspects of . . . the humanities. The humanities expand to encompass new phenomena, but the new insights reached are then drawn back inward into a tighter and tighter spiral. There is little sense that the humanities see themselves as helping themselves by serving others. Or that the humanities can go out into the world and—stay there.

We suggest, then, that humanists should be as much or more interested in how our research is relevant to those *beyond* the humanities: to scientists, engineers, policy-makers, the public and private sectors, the public in general. Today, these groups are largely ignorant of our work. While occasionally making gestures in our direction, they seldom seek to involve us on the project level. In fact, non-humanists simply do not read humanities papers. And that is a problem for both them and us.

The Future of the Humanities

(Which "camp" of philosophy could possibly be committed to less careful analysis, less thorough argumentation?).
--Leiter, *The Future for Philosophy*

If we want to influence the conversations of non-humanists, we need to get involved with their work rather than ask them to read ours. This suggestion runs up against a set of prejudices that define academic work: of our not being "rigorous" enough, or that such work is just a matter of "applying" concepts. We believe that these responses misconceive both the political and theoretical challenges that have traditionally been understood to constitute the humanities—the logical and rhetorical riddle of how to shape an argument for a given audience and context. It is a contemporary irony that the essentially humanistic task of highlighting the larger meaning of things is these days typically performed by scientists—for instance, E. O. Wilson or the late Steven J. Gould—or by politicians—e.g., Al Gore. We humanists have ceded the public field of play.

The problem is in part the result of a curious theoretical lacuna: We do not consider the institutional expression of the humanities to be a proper subject of theoretical speculation. We can find the occasional scholar who does: within English, Graf and Fish; in history, Himmelfarb; and in philosophy, McCumber and Leiter. In general, however, our thoughts concerning our institutional status are limited to lamentations about our lack of respect and funding.

Brian Leiter is instructive here. His *Philosophical Gourmet Report* has been ranking philosophy programs for 10 years, and his blog is perhaps the best known in the profession. Moreover, in 2006, he published an edited volume titled *The Future for Philosophy* which sought to lay out markers for what twenty-first-century philosophy should be. The book begins on an encouraging note. On the very first page of the introduction, Leiter notes that philosophy has always been characterized by its insistent meta-philosophical questioning—posing questions about "what philosophy is, its proper concerns, methods, and limitations." Leiter notes, however, that in addition to being posed as questions of theory, answers to this question are also developed "by the *doing of* philosophy" (italics in the original). "In this volume . . . some of the very best and most influential contemporary philosophers . . . are *doing* philosophy of mind, language, and science, as well as ethics, epistemology, feminist philosophy, and the history of philosophy" (1).

For Leiter, then, "doing philosophy" (keeping in mind that all these points we make here about philosophy apply equally across the humanities) consists of constructing arguments—philosophers writing philosophy essays for other philosophers. There is no sign that he had considered that there might be other kinds or ways of "doing." (Leiter, a student of Nietzsche, might have considered "philosophizing with a hammer.") It is possible, after all, that the future of philosophy might turn on something other than theoretical debates between philosophers. We might, for instance, raise questions of whether philosophers should be housed (or housed exclusively) in philosophy departments, or whether they might be scattered across campus; whether, or to what degree, they can find homes beyond academia; whether philosophy (or the humanities) is a "discipline" in the same sense as are other fields; and what public roles philosophy can take in these very philosophical times. Nonetheless, of the thirteen chapters in *The Future for Philosophy*, not one raises any such question concerning the institutional future of philosophy.

Leiter's thinking about the institution of philosophy thus ends up being remarkably unphilosophical. For instance, he does not even consider alternative methods of rating PhD programs. The *Philosophical Gourmet Report* prominently features a list of the philosophers whose opinions determined the results of the survey. 450 were canvassed; 270 replied. Care to guess the characteristics of the 450 who were asked to respond, out of the approximately 15,000 philosophers employed in the US? (Leiter offers no criteria besides asking philosophers at the "best" schools.) It will come as no surprise that Leiter's results have been

"remarkably stable" over the years. But more to the point here: Leiter not only fails to consider what the rankings might look like if a random cross-section of employed philosophers were surveyed. He also gives no thought to how non-philosophers would rank departments, or how programs could be evaluated according to citations outside philosophy journals, or by the amount of sponsored research they attract.

What we are suggesting here amounts to the de-disciplining of the humanities. Philosophy and the humanities made a fateful (some might say, a fatal) turn at the end of the nineteenth century when they accepted disciplinary standards for their academic work. Disciplines make sense for the sciences, for the sciences are *defined* by their nature as disciplines. Knowledge was disciplined beginning in the seventeenth century when a limited number of Western thinkers promoted the idea that truth is defined by experimental results. The experiment disciplines reality: It is constituted by the ability to repeat the same experiment over and over, parameterizing a slice of the world, controlling all variables then varying one at a time. The result: "true" (i.e., verifiable) knowledge—at the cost of irreality. Why irreal? For the world is unruly, unable to be disciplined. The humanities, however, cast their lot at the beginning of the twentieth century with disciplinarity, a portentous decision to strive for rigor at the expense of relevance, wisdom, and indeed a larger accuracy.

We admit that a de-disciplined notion of the humanities implies less rigor and exactitude in one thinking and writing. In the epigraph to this section, Leiter gives voice to the assumption underlying the humanities, and indeed the entire knowledge industry. In a point so obvious that it could be placed in rhetorical parentheses, Leiter claims that we must aim for the highest possible pitch of philosophical rigor: "(Which 'camp' of philosophy could possibly be committed to less careful analysis, less thorough argumentation?)" Leiter treats rigor, analysis, and precision of argument as if they were paramount or unimpeachable virtues, rather than constituting a set of virtues that must exist in competition with others. Rigor should be (and in fact always is, even if we do not usually acknowledge the fact) balanced with other desiderata such as timeliness, cost, and pertinence to one's audience. As Aristotle notes, it is a sign of an educated person to seek only as much clarity as a subject matter admits of—or, for that matter, needs. *Pace* Leiter, rigor of argumentation should be subject to a mean.

Certainly, our societal problems require a large dose of additional philosophic and humanistic reflection. But at this point in human culture, with pressing problems in all directions and a bias toward either technical

or fundamentalist solutions to all our problems, rather than more argumentation, what humanists most need is skill in "translation." Master the basic arguments, yes—in fact, be a monk for a number of years, withdraw from the world, engage in contemplation. Emulate Nietzsche's Zarathustra, who retreated to his mountain for a season and more. But like Zarathustra, also recognize that we must complete the circle by rejoining the human race. Practice the skills of learning how to insert a pertinent insight into a non-humanistic conversation in a powerful and brief manner. Yes, our students must become adept at philosophical and humanistic analysis, mastering deep insights within their chosen subjects. But once they graduate, they should understand that their careers need not consist of 30 or 40 years of further sharpening of their philosophical razors. It is time to go abroad in the world and see what work can be done.

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