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From Plato's Academy to the Era of Hyperspecialization: Rediscovering the Lost Spirit of the Humanities*

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We are drowning in information but starved for knowledge.
John Naisbitt

THE TRAJECTORY OF THE WESTERN TRADITION

The entire Western tradition can be seen as struggle and dialogue between two different ways of knowing: one which is deeper and engages the entire human being, a search for an integrated worldview that is often self-transformative and participatory; and another which is primarily instrumental or utilitarian in its focus.

For the early Greek philosophers like Plato and the Pythagoreans, philosophy was the search for an integrated worldview in which all branches of human knowledge and concern were implicated. They viewed the cosmos as a whole system in which human beings participated, and assumed that human knowledge, at its deepest, must relate to the living unity of the world's integrated structure.

In the philosophy of Plato, the domains of ethics, ontology, cosmology, and the desire to create a flourishing personal life and social order were not separate concerns, but parts of one integrated inquiry. The purpose of *education* in Plato is to understand the nature of goodness, so that it can be manifest in human life and in the world. The philosopher's *social role* entails study and understanding of the harmony, order and beauty of the cosmos, which he or she will then therapeutically cultivate and use as a guide in private and civic life (*Republic* 500C–E).

The arc of the Western tradition has been one of increasing specialization. This started after Plato with the systematic research programs developed by Aristotle's school, which the Museum and Library at

* This is the edited text of a paper presented at the symposium 'The Humanities, the Experience of the Transcendent, and the Future of Higher Education', held by the Cosmopolis Project in Athens, 18-21 June 2015.

Alexandria were established to continue.¹ But it became much more pronounced after the Renaissance with the proliferation of ever-more focused fields of study in both the sciences and the humanities. At the extreme end of this trajectory, where we are now, 'the radical fragmentation of knowledge is making it difficult to understand any kind of big picture', to quote David McConville. He continues:

Academia now has 8,000 disciplines, 50,000 journals, and over a million articles published every year. A visualization from the University of California–San Diego shows how few disciplines actually draw from, or even reference, fields other than their own. We are facing a time of extreme hyperspecialization.²

THE EFFECTS OF HYPERSPECIALIZATION

Specialization can be good, but hyperspecialization is pernicious: it fragments both the world and human nature. In a world of hyperspecialization with no common worldview or values, much of the 'knowledge' produced is meaningless to society simply because it is part of an instrumentalist 'processing exercise' and has no relationship to a larger whole.

Human knowledge at its deepest is analytic *and* synthetic: through analysis, we take things apart intellectually; but through synthesis, we put things together to create a meaningful worldview.

Hyperspecialization discourages individuals from engaging with, and thinking meaningfully about, larger issues; it prevents them from arriving at the kinds of synthetic solutions that are urgently required today. Consequently, it inhibits people from developing their complete humanity—from becoming well-rounded individuals, able genuinely to participate in civic discourse, which was one of the traditional goals of a liberal education.

Hyperspecialization and the lack of an integrated worldview are also, in my view, among the prime causes of the worldwide ecological crisis. Over the past forty years, the human population on the Earth has

1. It is a little-known but important historical fact that the Museum and Library at Alexandria were established by members of Aristotle's school to continue research programs that Aristotle had established in Athens. For more on this, see my monograph on *Platonic Academies* (forthcoming).

2. David McConville, 'Valorizing the Sphere', lecture from the Society for Arts and Technology: available online at: <<http://www.cosmopolisproject.org/valorizing-the-sphere/>>.

doubled, while the population of wild animals has fallen by 50 percent.³ Because of specialization, we seemingly cannot do anything about this or even acknowledge it. Someone might say, 'It's not my field'; and it's no one else's field either, apparently. While specialization may provide us with important data to monitor a rapidly worsening situation, we seem to lack the kind of integrated perspective and wisdom to respond to it in an effective way.

Ultimately, hyperspecialization fragments and destroys. Will we and the world end up as Cantor dust? Will the idea of meaning once and for all be discarded from the academic world and replaced by specialization, deconstruction, analysis without synthesis, and instrumental thinking?

Looking back from our 'Era of Hyperspecialization' to the thought of Plato, his ideas about higher learning seem even more relevant now than they did in his own time. Aside from his idea that the end of higher education is to understand the nature of goodness, Plato's thought that the philosopher should study and understand the harmony, order and beauty of the cosmos, which he or she will then therapeutically cultivate in private and civic life, is a precursor of the field of ecological design—and perhaps the basis for a truly sustainable civilization.

THE TRAJECTORY OF THE HUMANITIES

The Greek idea of 'human flourishing' was present in the work of Plato, Aristotle and the Stoic philosophers, and always involved the ideas of cultivating human nature through education and learning, which allow the mind, human rationality, and the soul to flower.

All of the Seven Liberal Arts that were codified in medieval times were implicit in Plato's writings, and Seneca discusses a much wider range of 'liberal arts' in his day (Letter 88), and makes the somewhat sweeping claim that philosophy is the only true liberal art because it is the only art that will make us free. Be that as it may, his discussion is very interesting, because it shows how many of the problems currently facing the academic world existed in antiquity too. But while the roots of the humanities clearly lay in the classical world, it is only with Renaissance humanism that our *modern* conception of 'the humanities' really came into being.

3. See Damian Carrington, 'Earth has lost half of its wildlife in the past 40 years, says WWF', *The Guardian*, 30 September 2014. Available online at: <<http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/sep/29/earth-lost-50-wildlife-in-40-years-wwf>>.

The Latin word *humanitas* means 'human nature', 'civilization', 'kindness' and 'benevolence', and the initial *studia humanitatis* of the Renaissance humanists included the study of grammar (reading), rhetoric (speaking and writing), history, poetry and moral philosophy. Of course, the subjects expanded as time went on.

But what is common to all of the Renaissance humanists—take your pick—is that *the humanities are not just a study, the humanities are a practice*. You can see this in all of their works and all of their writings.

In their original sense in the Renaissance, the humanities were *a transformative practice* that aimed to cultivate *humanitas* and human flourishing in the personal and civic spheres. For the Renaissance humanists, the humanities involved the study of what it means to be human, the active cultivation and perfection of human nature, and the participation in—and cultivation of—a larger social order of which they were a part. Humanism was set in a civic context, and some humanists like Leonardo Bruni championed the idea of humanism as uniting the active and contemplative life. That is why his hero was Cicero, since he simultaneously wrote philosophy and served the republic; and the same can be said of other Latin writers, like Seneca and Marcus Aurelius, whom the humanists also admired.

I want to argue vigorously that the humanities in the original Renaissance sense no longer exist in the postmodern academic world (with possibly a few exceptions, which are likely to be eliminated in the near future). For some time now the humanities have become 'scientific' objects of study, approached from the gaze of the disengaged Cartesian spectator, where we can only learn *about* the great thinkers and works from the past, and not actually learn anything *from* them.

Not only does the original meaning of the humanities no longer exist, I am convinced it is not actually even understood these days by many people in the academic world. This can be seen for instance in the words of Rens Bod, author of *A New History of the Humanities*:

Simply put, humanities 1.0 refers to the hermeneutic and critical tradition as it was developed during the nineteenth and early twentieth century; humanities 2.0 refers to the identification and representation of patterns by digital means in the humanities as it has been developed in the second half of the twentieth and the early twenty-first century, and finally humanities 3.0 refers to the hermeneutic and critical tradition applied to these tools used and patterns obtained by humanities 2.0. In my inaugural lecture I describe this third stage as the fulfillment of the technological turn

in the humanities where the positivist and the hermeneutically inclined humanities scholar each find their proper place.⁴

You can see that there is no appreciation whatsoever in this passage for the original Renaissance idea of the humanities. The modern sense of ‘the humanities’ is only the ‘academic’ study and processing of what *used to be* the humanities. (As he states, ‘humanities 1.0’ only refers to the critical tradition of the modern academy.) *The original spirit of the humanities is totally excluded, and we cannot be sure from the quotation whether it was ever understood in the first place.* But now, with ‘the digital humanities’, we can look at art and literature and actually ‘data mine’ them, to see whether any interesting patterns might unexpectedly arise. The ideas of cultivating human nature and making a contribution to society are totally absent; ‘the humanities’ have become a self-enclosed pursuit with little social value or relevance. They are now a processing exercise—even an exercise in data processing.

The tone of the quotation above—written in flat, technocratic, and clinical language—is also an example of the consequences of hyperspecialization. While technically precise, it leaves us feeling impoverished psychologically and spiritually; it reduces the humanities to an object of exploitation (to be mined, data mined, or whatever); and it valorizes professional exercises in ‘processing’ over deeper levels of understanding and insight.

When I emailed Bod’s words to a friend who is a professor in the United States, he sent me the following response:

Yes, the other day I was down the hall where English has a ‘neuroscience’ digital humanities lab. An undergrad and I started to talk, and she said they had been trying to map how the brain responds to sonnets, and not having much success. I wondered aloud that if one was successful in such an enterprise, what would it tell us about meaning anyway? She had no answer, of course.⁵

These two items—first the quotation on ‘humanities 3.0’ and then my friend’s response—confirmed my thesis: that there is a distinct

4. Rens Bod, ‘Who’s Afraid of Patterns? The Particular versus the Universal and the Meaning of Humanities 3.0’, *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 128:4 (2013) 171–80: p. 176. Available online at: <<http://www.bmg-n-lchr.nl/articles/abstract/10.18352/bmg-n-lchr.9351/>>

5. Private communication. At my friend’s university, the English department eliminated the courses on Shakespeare many years ago while introducing new courses on text messaging.

trajectory from the original meaning of the humanities as resources for the cultivation of human life to some kind of abstract study, emulating the epistemology of the Cartesian spectator that serves as the basis for the exact sciences. Or, as Arthur Krystal has described it, the humanities are no longer concerned with ideas but are now focused on how ideas are produced.⁶

THE INTELLECTUAL CRISIS OF OUR TIME

What has led to the crisis in the humanities is two-fold, in my opinion.

The first factor has been the stupendous breakthroughs and advances made by the scientific tradition since the Renaissance, which, through its spectacular discoveries, had the effect of overshadowing and marginalizing other ways of knowing.

The second factor has been the realization that models in the 'most perfect' of all scientific domains—mathematical physics—can work quite well without actually being 'true' or corresponding to reality in a one-to-one way. The fact that scientific models can work without being true also implies that *we can never know* if a model is true or not in an ultimate sense, only that it works. This realization, along with the seeds planted by Kant's view that 'we can never know the thing in itself', and his idea that reality is 'a construct' based on a priori ideas, opened the doorway to Nietzsche's *perspectivism* ('There are no truths, only perspectives'); to *postmodernism*, which was defined by Jean-François Lyotard as an 'incredulity toward metanarratives'; and ultimately to Foucault's idea that 'truth' and 'knowledge' are social constructs 'thoroughly imbued with relations of power', which makes them objects of deconstruction for other writers, since they can now be seen as forces of oppression.

This, in turn, opened the doorway to analyzing any conceivable academic topic politically or ideologically in terms of gender, race, power relations, colonialism, or what not.⁷

6. For this important analysis, see Arthur Krystal, 'The Shrinking World of Ideas', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 21 November 2014. Available online at: <<http://chronicle.com/article/The-Shrinking-World-of-Ideas/150141/>>.

7. For one perspective on how the kinds of ideologies and power battles that have taken over the humanities have 'destroyed literary study in the graduate schools and humanities', see an interview of Harold Bloom by Michael Skafidas: 'Harold Bloom: Preposterous "Isms" Are Destroying Literature', *Huffington Post*, 10 June 2015. Available at: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-skafidas/harold-bloom-preposterous_b_7546334.html>.

It is not that these topics are irrelevant by any means; but the way in which they have come repetitively, formulaically and obsessive-compulsively to occupy the forefront of academic discourse has created a body of thought that is primarily theoretical, ideological and self-enclosed—while in the real world, for example, the biosphere is being destroyed before our very eyes. Moreover, the problem with such ‘critical theory’ is that, while reveling in a kind of deconstruction, it fails to offer constructive thought on how to cultivate value in human life or the world.

Despite the fact that scientific theory is no longer seen as corresponding to the world in a one-to-one way (the correspondence theory of truth is dead), science still has all the power, probably because it produces measurable results, and the humanities have been marginalized. That is precisely why people in the humanities want to picture their work as being ‘scientific’, and to objectify their subjects in a Cartesian way, as something to which they have no personal relationship. And this approach, rooted at least partially in insecurity, has led to the eclipse of the humanities in the original sense, as a transformative practice to cultivate human flourishing.

THE SOLUTION OF EPISTEMOLOGICAL PLURALISM

Given the rather grim situation, is any real solution possible?

Without a coherent idea to guide it, the academic world is just going to remain a chaotic battleground, producing more of the same papers, more of the same politics, and more of the same ideological power struggles. And without being able to articulate a vision of the humanities and their value, as was done in the Renaissance, the humanities cannot even exist.

But if the correspondence theory of truth is dead, the participatory theory of truth is not. And just because scientific models do not correspond to reality in a one-to-one way does not mean that they are not connected with reality in some genuine way. If this were not so, they would not work as well as they do. It is just that they do not tell the full story; and they never will. If they did, science itself would come to an end as an ongoing inquiry.

Epistemological pluralism is based on the idea that the world is ‘infinitely deep’. Since no one way of knowing can ever fully embrace an infinitely deep universe, multiple ways of knowing are called for. The more ways of knowing an individual has available, the more

deeply he or she will be able to know and understand the world. All modalities of knowledge contribute to our understanding of the whole, and the more modalities we develop and encompass, the broader our knowledge becomes.

Not surprisingly, this takes us back to the idea of 'the Renaissance man', who could be a scientist, a lover, a poet and an inventor, all at the same time. It also takes us back to Goethe's statement that 'The things of heaven and earth contain such a wealth of value that only the organs of all beings jointly can encompass it.'⁸

The idea that the world is infinitely deep allows us to integrate *all* forms of knowing and also to avoid the epistemological triumphalism that has tended to plague the scientific tradition. (For example, Descartes believed that, given a few years, his method of reductionism would be able to solve every possible scientific problem and cleanse the world of all mystery. This kind of thinking can easily turn into a kind of bigotry, as we see in Richard Dawkins, who openly proclaims that all other forms of knowledge are grossly inferior to science.)

In a world or a university where epistemological pluralism was the guiding principle, there would be room for science and the humanities to exist happily side by side (and after all, they need each other), for various fields to cross-fertilize one another, for *all* the ways of knowing to be respected; and there would even be room for the idea that there is a level of absolute truth in the universe, even if we can never finally pin it down, once and for all.

In such a state, we would live in a world of Renaissance men and women, and the humanities could be reborn. Moreover, it would allow us to realize the traditional goal of a liberal arts education: the ability to think deeply and coherently about life and the larger human and natural order in which we are embedded, and to develop a state of mind that is both knowledgeable about the past and open to the future.

Finally, by affirming the multiple ways of knowing, epistemological pluralism allows us to move beyond the postmodern reduction of human thought to mere perspectivism, instrumentalism or ideology, so that we can once again learn *from* the world and *from* our intellectual traditions. This allows us to seek out and embody an integrated worldview that is not a static or closed 'theory of everything', but a

8. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, quoted in Jeremy Naydler, *Goethe on Science: An Anthology of Goethe's Scientific Writings* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1996), p. 46.

living vision that allows us to see and investigate the world in deep, comprehensive, and satisfying ways.⁹

9. See further David Fidler, 'Science's Missing Half: Epistemological Pluralism and the Search for an Inclusive Cosmology', *Alexandria* 5 (Grand Rapids: Phanes Press, 2000), pp. 41-73. Available online at: <<http://www.davidfideler.com/files/epistemological-pluralism.pdf>>.



Stairs leading to Plato's Academy