

Reformation and Renaissance New Life for the Humanities*

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One evening I was getting into the crowded lift at my local tube station in Central London, to go down to the train. As the doors closed a middle-aged gentleman squeezed in. I recognised him as a fairly distinguished professor of history from the University of London School of Advanced Study, where I directed the philosophy program. As we descended he suddenly blurted out to everyone and no one: “That’s it; I’ve had it. What they’re doing to our arts faculties is a complete disgrace.” We looked at our feet as he went on about the government, university administrators and the general ruin of intellectual culture.

I don’t know what made him snap at that moment. But the professor in the lift has for me become a symbol of the view that the humanities are hard done-by and that they are in decline – or at least in an extended period of trouble – through no fault of their own, but because of bad decisions by others.

In less dramatic ways I have heard this analysis restated many times during my years in Australia: the academic humanities are doing a good job; they are fine, serious and important disciplines, staffed by able and sincere people. But governments and university administrators set impossible targets, demand crazy workloads, cut budgets, reducing staff numbers and imposing a stultifying managerial regime, and generally forcing the humanities onto the defensive.

There’s a simple and morally necessary solution, according to this view: increase our funding, then leave us alone.

When I arrived in Australia, in 2001, this analysis seemed to cohere with a political assumption, even a political blindness. In the years during which John Howard was Prime Minister many humanities academics assumed that he was personally responsible for their situation. A Prime Min-

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ister is a terrifying adversary, but also cause for submerged optimism. Howard would (eventually) be defeated and – the thinking went – because he was the sole cause of the troubles, the good times would roll again.

There was in the humanities a generalised, and very honest, inability to imagine John Howard as anything other than an aberration, sustained by deceit and media manipulation, rather than as a man who was exceptionally adept at expressing widespread opinions.

Consequently, there was no self-examination: there was no hint that the humanities might themselves have contributed to their troubles, that they may have failed to win sufficient public respect and admiration to carry weight in national life.

I believe the academic humanities require radical reform – not just in their institutional framework but in their intellectual self-conception, their sense of purpose, of mission even; in their habits of mind, their modes of admiration and the direction of effort. Ironically, such reform is needed to *return* the humanities to their grandest, most longstanding ambitions. Wisdom should be powerful in the world: that is why we teach, research, and engage the public.

And that is why this essay is called “Reformation and renaissance”. I want to show how reform is needed in order to accomplish something magnificent and serious. There is a tendency in the humanities to hear a call for reform as a threat. Calls for reform always seem to come from people who don’t especially care about the humanities. I want to change that association and to connect the idea of reform to the pursuit of great educational endeavours.

Taken one way, “the humanities” is the traditional name for a group of academic disciplines, of which the core members, identified by subject matter, are philosophy, history, art history and the study of literature. (It’s an imperfect nomenclature. There are subject areas such as music, fine art, architecture, religious studies and politics that have much in common with the humanities, although they are not usually covered by the term.)

Looked at from a distance it seems obvious that the humanities would, almost of necessity, occupy a central, highly valued place in the collective life of a society. In principle, the academic disciplines called the humanities are concerned with the study of basic human issues: what can we learn from the past that is important to know today; how should we think about experience; what is valuable and why; what is the mean-

ing of life; what is justice? In addition, the humanities are the repositories of all the best stories, the greatest narratives, the biggest adventures in thinking, the finest creative works.

The political and institutional difficulties of the humanities should be puzzling – even disturbing. How can it be that the keepers of so much that is self-evidently important and interesting have arrived at this situation? And is there anything that can and should be done to put things to rights?

There are different ways to tell whether the humanities are thriving, just coasting along, or in trouble. An institutional yardstick would assess things like the ranking of schools or departments in national and international league tables. It would measure the number of staff employed, or the number of papers published in journals which are well regarded by academics, or the number of competitive grants won – in competition against other humanities academics, and awarded on the assessments made of proposals by high-placed humanities experts.

These are internal assessments. They measure department against department, university against university. Such assessment is fine if you think that overall things are going well, for in that case you can spot local weaknesses or pockets of special success, and set about remedial action or imitation.

But such assessment is fatal if there is drift or decline in a whole field of activity. It gives far too much weight to the views of insiders – in fact, this is all that it measures. And if you think – as I have come to think – that there is a problem within the humanities, then just measuring the view from inside may not be helpful at all.

In politics, one of the most damaging things that can happen to a party is to be captured by its activist base. Their party conferences are euphoric, the activists praise one another and push for policies which thrill them. But the task for a party isn't to delight its activists; it's to earn the trust of the wider world. And it may happen – we know it can happen in politics – that a dangerous gulf opens between the preoccupations of a devoted group of insiders and the concerns of the wider population.

If you want to know how a field of human endeavour is faring as a whole you have to look outwards. You have to look at the need for that endeavour and the potential of the enterprise. The question cannot be: how do the humanities regard themselves from the inside? The question must be: how are the humanities flourishing (or not) everywhere else? This is a question the humanities owe it to themselves to ask; it is a noble

question, a confident question – one that springs from a conviction that the humanities ought to be judged in such grand terms.

In September 2010 I participated in a daylong discussion at the Melbourne Business School: a key moment in the debate about the future of business education. What qualities of mind and character should the school be fostering through its MBA program? There was a broad consensus that qualities such as imagination, communicative verve, conceptual analysis, awareness of the broad issues of history and – above all – self-knowledge were important. These were seen as valuable not only in themselves, but in helping students towards successful careers in successful companies. For such qualities are not an indulgence, but sources of competitive advantage. Moreover, they have much to contribute to the development of a good economy.

It could be said that an appeal was being made to the humanities. In a deep sense that is absolutely right. The qualities that are recognised as much needed in business education (because much needed in business) are rooted in the humanities. In principle, history, literature, philosophy and art could all have much to contribute here.

But it would be a mistake to think that this need could easily be met by the existing disciplines. For one thing, they have internalised a general suspicion of – even hostility to – the idea of business. I believe that suspicion is unwarranted. But it supports my argument when people object and say that the humanities are right to be suspicious – for that is simply to cut those disciplines off from a place where they could be of great service to the world.

Unthinkingly you could suppose that business, like some wicked tyrant, merely wants to exploit humanities-type intelligence for mean-spirited ends. Bring us your eloquence (so we can make more money); bring us your insights into the narrative of history (so we can make more money); bring us your knowledge of the creative achievements of art...

I don't deny that this could conceivably occur. But it is nothing like what we were talking about. Businesses have to make money; but how they are profitable, what they are like, what they are like to work for, what they produce, what their impact on the world is, how they influence society: these are all open questions, and many different answers are all compatible with the bottom line of satisfying the shareholders. And in any case, business education is now often a route to working for NGOs that face many of the same questions as commercial enterprises:

questions of efficiency, management, purpose, dealing with divergent stakeholders.

Business is such a vast and central part of the contemporary world that it would be crazy to write it off as unworthy of serious attention from the humanities. At the same time this suggests a lack of confidence in the worth of the humanities themselves. Surely, if they are so important, they could contribute powerfully to the good education of executives.

My fear is that there's no way the needs of business education could be met by sending students across campus to attend existing humanities classes. In an interesting experiment, the social philosopher Charles Handy taught a class at the London Business School on Sophocles' *Antigone* (Handy 2006: 69-79). It's a good choice for business executives. The central character, Antigone, is caught in a conflict between two kinds of loyalty – to the demands of the state and to her conscience. She wants to provide a proper burial for her brothers who have fallen in battle against their native city; but the ruler of the city forbids this, since the brothers were enemies of the state. Antigone follows her conscience and is condemned to death. The play raises the question: what would you have done? It provokes discussion of more likely scenarios: what would be the equivalent today? Can the same kind of conflict occur in less tragic but still significant ways? And then how would you decide? How would you respond if you were, as might well be the case in the future, in the position not of Antigone but of the ruler?

The play's value is as a starting point for serious discussion. And the discussion gets more serious the more people are willing to bring their own experience, their own ambitions and their own loyalties into play. It depends also upon the determination of the teacher to make this happen – to guide it and judge it and participate.

I don't doubt that there are academics in humanities disciplines who could do this if required. It's just that if they can it's a happy accident. There's nothing at all in the requirements of the job that test for this ability; it has nothing to do with peer approval or promotion or publication or research standing. There isn't an institutional culture that reflects continuously and ambitiously on how to do this as well as possible. Doing it really well – realising the opportunities afforded by the play to maximum effect in the lives of students – is a complex, sophisticated skill.

I appreciate that somewhere in the background there has to be a body of scholarly knowledge – that has enabled translation of the text, that has framed basic ways of thinking about it (Hegel was quite helpful here) and that can flesh out the significance of the speeches. But we must re-

member that this scholarly base is there to support the kind of discussion that the executives have. It's not an end in itself and its worth should be gauged by what it enables us to do. Further, a single scholarly base can serve pretty much the whole world. In preparing that kind of class the teacher only needs to be able to get such background insight from somewhere – it doesn't matter whether it comes from someone at Harvard or from the classics professor across the campus. Existing knowledge may already be sufficient for the higher purpose.

I recall being sent a collection of graduate papers on *Antigone*. I don't want to mention the university they came from and I don't think it matters – similar collections could have been produced in almost any serious university in the western world. The papers did not represent a local oddity; they were from the academic mainstream.

What they had in common was that they were extremely complicated. The graduate students had gone to extraordinary lengths to show how much high-intellectual matter they had absorbed. Being intelligent meant being difficult. Despite many years of intellectual training in philosophy, I often found it hard to follow the arguments presented. They solved problems I didn't have. It was as if they were saying to me: "So, you don't know enough about the structuralist appropriation of Greek tragedy – let me help you out." Or: "Worried about the erasure of class in nineteenth-century construction of 'the classics'? I share your pain." The concerns struck me as forced. They were interests that could be raised in the hothouse. I imagined a seminar in which students egg each other onto more and more *recherché* topics.

The academic ideal of what to do with a major play like *Antigone* is at odds with the value the play has for non-specialists. But the value to non-specialists is not a lower type of value. It's not that the executives Charles Handy was teaching were, sadly, too stupid to understand the high-theoretical games. It's that their needs were more serious and substantial: more real. The aim of complication was not to make the play more important; it was to demonstrate a specialised kind of technique.

This is the impasse that the humanities face. There is a deep need for what they have to offer. But they have evolved – under special circumstances – in a way that makes it difficult for them to respond to and meet that need.

In her recent book, *Not for Profit*, the eminent American philosopher Martha Nussbaum argues that democracies need the humanities to be

strong and pervasive. The humanities, she argues, teach critical thinking, imagination, compassion, and develop individuals who are global citizens – people with a sense of the big order of the world. Nussbaum is right to say that these need to be widespread capacities if democracies are to function well. We need inner resources so that “class, fame and prestige count for nothing, and the argument counts for all” – as she deftly summarises the lesson of Socrates (Nussbaum 2010: 51).

The kind of education she has in mind will, she admits, be costly in resources. It needs to be experiential, participatory; classes have to be small. And all that I heartily agree with. At the same time, Nussbaum argues that the humanities are under continuous attacks from governments that regard education primarily as a vehicle for continuous economic growth, and from students (and their parents, who often influence the choices of their children) who want to get their share – and perhaps a little more than their share – of that growth.

The paradox is that, in order to have access to the kinds of resources Nussbaum says they need, the humanities would have to do a great deal of convincing – and they would specifically have to convince people who are starting from an unsympathetic position. Hence, her book’s title is unfortunate. What’s bad about profit? It’s precisely people who care about profit who need to be brought on board.

In fact, the title is misleading. As the argument develops, it becomes clear that Nussbaum actually agrees with me and my colleagues at the Melbourne Business School. If we want a successful economy we need businesses to absorb the best that the humanities could offer. The economic model that suggests business is all about technicality and applying rules is incorrect. You can’t claim that you could further economic growth while ignoring things like imagination, independence of mind, ethics or social responsibility. Properly understood, good education would support a good economy. So, in Nussbaum’s terms, it would be for profit. It would achieve many other goods as well; but those goods are not in opposition to the pursuit of profit. She is only opposed to a misguided, unsustainable strategy for obtaining profit.

A similar shift between the apparent claims and details of Nussbaum’s argument can be traced in her idea of teaching in the humanities. In her big statements it often sounds as if she thinks that democracy will be well served if the existing ways of pursuing the humanities are merely multiplied: much more of the same. But the detail of her argument points in another direction. It becomes clear that the kind of education she has in mind is not the one that is normally given in the name of the

humanities. And so, as she quietly says, large reforms will be needed if the humanities are to rise to serve the great purpose she assigns them.

One of the obstacles to seizing the opportunity is imaginative and intellectual: there's a deep fear of dumbing down.

"Dumbing down" suggests a tragic split: either you are serious but speak only to insiders, or you speak to the rest of the world but talk nonsense. The phrase implies that it is impossible to speak wisely to a general audience. In this view, humanities intelligence cannot be potent or persuasive beyond the walls of the academy. "Dumbing down" is contrasted with the conversation of the seminar room, the conference and research journals addressed to a professional audience. This fear is extremely important. If the power of the humanities depends upon their integration with the life of a society and their capacity to speak to the experience of large numbers of individuals, then a conviction that this is impossible is a serious impediment.

"Dumbing down" is a real phenomenon. The question is not whether it ever happens. Rather, what we need to know is whether it is inevitable. Is any attempt to take serious thought outside the walls of the academy doomed?

The central narrative, I think, is this. You understand some issue in the strenuous, refined arena of the academy. To explain the issue to others you must inevitably simplify; but to simplify is to abandon the very things that were important in the first place. The narrative is exemplary in the sciences. Simply put, the layperson cannot understand the real reasons why a particular hypothesis is attractive, or what the underlying principles of explanation and method are. Unless you study the topics carefully for several years, you simply won't understand. You may think you do, but that is delusional.

The sciences only just hold their own against this. Because of the obvious and immense power of technology – which derives from science – there is a fairly widespread conviction that what scientists do is serious and productive, even if we do not understand it. Although even here the conviction is fragile.

In a recent essay in these pages the historian Tom Griffiths made a fine case for the importance of the humanities in helping make science, particularly the science of climate change, more powerful in the imaginations of more people. As he put it: "Understanding the history of ideas enables a more subtle and discriminating assessment of the public de-

bate about climate change today. There is not only widespread confusion about the science, but also a misunderstanding of how science – or any disciplined knowledge – operates.” (Griffiths 2010). I agree, but I am awed by the implications. He places a huge burden on the shoulders of the humanities. As it happens, he has his share of bearing the load. But it’s crucial to see how powerfully this commits him (and anyone who sympathises with him) to courage in the face of the fear of dumbing down. He asserts a public task, on the widest scale: transforming the way not just a few people think but the way a whole society thinks about something as complex as the idea of disciplined knowledge.

The worth of the humanities ultimately depends upon their mattering in people’s lives. They might matter because they give help with personal or collective problems; they might matter because they provide emotional or ethical insight; they might help shape a good view of the world; they might (as Nussbaum thinks) sustain democracy; or (as I think) improve the economy; they might (as Tom Griffiths thinks) help us address long-term environmental issues. But all these benefits depend upon the humanities being widely and deeply engaged with non-traditional audiences.

All the specialist work in the world will not achieve these benefits if it remains distant from the public. I don’t think that this point is particularly controversial. The controversy comes when you realise that the professional structures and institutional facts of the academic humanities are at odds with this ambition. The ultimate point of research and specialised work is to further those great public educational ends. But that’s not how the system works.

Not so long ago I had a terrifying run-in with a former president of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. I admire his work. He took the view that the humanities were already engaged with the tasks I advocate and already doing an exceptionally good job. He was very angry, and I felt intimidated. I think I now understand what was at stake. As an individual he has tried to do the sorts of things I believe we need to do. My criticism is not of him but of a system that makes him an exception (even if an honoured one) and leaves it to chance whether academics share his ambitions.

The system we have was designed to produce what in the middle of the last century was called a mandarin culture. That is, a cadre of professors who would – like leading scientists – discover the most refined knowledge, which would then, somehow, trickle down to the rest of soci-

ety. Or, would perhaps simply bypass the public. The top humanities academics would live in the same world as the leading politicians, industrialists and public servants. At the high tables of the universities they would find a single pinnacle. The wisdom of the humanities would thereby be effective in the world, without having to cultivate a general audience. And this was given more plausibility because – at that time – you could just about believe, at least in the UK, that the humanities represented a formalised, ambitious version of the culture of the executive class.

If this ever existed, it belongs now to the realm of fantasy. If the humanities are to be powerful in the world it must be through their role in the lives of large numbers of people.

Hostility to what is thought of as dumbing down is really a confusion of means and ends. Technical specialisation is only a means to something else – ideally, more important knowledge. And the end is that such knowledge should be effective in the world. But to be fitted to be effective in the world, such knowledge cannot remain in its specialised form. This is not an unfortunate concession that has to be made. It is the most noble and sophisticated task.

There are solutions to the problem of dumbing down. It's not a mystery. It's just that the humanities have been set up institutionally in a way that puts the solution out of reach – with rare exceptions.

The solution is to be found in the cultivation of two intertwined practices. The first – and ultimately most difficult – derives from a question most famously posed by St Augustine: “Why is it good to know that?” The question needs to be taken with the utmost seriousness and pursued as far as we possibly can. It is common currency in the humanities to suppose that your own work is important (leaving aside the damned, who work only to meet administrative demands and who have lost any sense that what they do is important in other ways). But this belief is generally tacit – not surprisingly, because academics are mainly working for the interest and admiration of a peer group who, almost by definition, share a sense of what's important. There are furious battles of ideas; but these are conducted among people who share a background, not before an unconvinced audience.

The second solution is artistry. I spend most of my working life writing books for the commercial market. In the past ten years I've published five books with Penguin UK. My intellectual background is firmly philosophical and I draw continually on my six years of graduate studies. I was educated mainly in the analytic tradition, which places great em-

phasis on the definition of concepts, the formation and rebuttal of argument, the clarification of ambiguity and a precise sense of the scope of claims – what is being claimed; what is not included in the claim.

In my books I try to write in a way that is not merely accessible to non-specialists; I try to speak to the inner lives of readers. There is a huge difference. Almost every newspaper article is accessible. Whether it is moving, beautiful, serious, engaging is another matter entirely. I devote a great deal of attention to the tone of the writing, to the length of paragraphs, to the flow of each sentence.

None of this has anything whatever to do with dumbing down – the attempt to find an audience by feigning stupidity. My model of writing is based on the best intellectual-literary works I know: *Middlemarch* and *War and Peace*. George Eliot and Tolstoy have an astonishing ability to convey ideas as part of experience. That's what I aspire to.

If it takes two or three years to write a book, writing for an average of two hours every day, and if a book is around two hundred pages in length, that's the equivalent of three days per page. Or about a hundred words a day. In fact, I often write a thousand or more words a day. So nine-tenths of the effort is rewriting. Almost everything gets thrown away.

In my writing practice, research is not a major concern. This is partly because I often feel that, in a technical sense, I already know more than the book requires. What I don't know is why an idea is important or exciting. That's what needs to be worked out. It's discovered by asking myself: why, really, am I interested in a particular topic? What is beauty to me, for instance, or why do I care about the idea of civilisation? I start out with a vague thrill: these concepts seem to me to have immense promise, but I don't know why. I'm trying to uncover what that promise and excitement is. And I'm trying to work out how to share it with other people. A critical resource is recalling – reliving – the experience of not being interested, or of being baffled, or of being bored, of reading books which I found disappointing or which I read out of a sense of duty. I need to listen to my own associations; I need to risk recognising that the development of an idea is tedious – even if it is true.

When I took up a post at the Melbourne Business School some of my fellow academics in the Arts Faculty at the University of Melbourne described it as “going over to the dark side.”

One of my colleagues at the school was formerly a colleague in the

then philosophy departments at Monash and later at Melbourne. She's a philosopher of mind and science. I dropped by her office to talk about the strange fact that we'd both ended up in a business school. Drawing on our experiences we sketched a "Rome to Constantinople" theory of the future of the humanities. As the Roman Empire developed, the balance of its interests and needs for government shifted to the east. We imagined a migration of humanities talent, with people being drawn to the places where their insights, curiosity and intellectual skills were most needed and appreciated. Would the most interesting historians, we wondered, one day be based in faculties of economics and commerce – where their understanding of the forces that shape the world would be of maximum application? Could the philosophers of the future find their offices in investment banks – where the hardest problems of meaning and value and logical analysis need to be understood and tested in reality?

Perhaps this is not just a fantasy. In recent months I've been involved in a major project on ethical leadership that reaches into the highest levels of executive education. This project – which has substantial external funding – is based in a business school, although the topics with which it deals, power and ethics, might seem to belong by rights to the humanities. And these are humanities themes; it's just that the official centres of the humanities are not the places where they are being pursued in the most helpful ways.

The program provides intensive education for the most senior managers of major businesses and corporations. Required readings are drawn from the classics of the western canon, and constitute a mini-course in the humanities. The aim is serious: let's read Nietzsche or Tolstoy to see what they can teach us about the meaning of life, the nature of values and the project of articulating your most consequential beliefs. And we are doing this with a sense of practical urgency. We need to get good at this kind of thinking.

Ethics and leadership are deep topics of the humanities. They are also practical matters. They need to be put into action in the world; our understanding of them needs to grow from close reflection on the actual experience of individuals; for, ultimately, the relevant knowledge – the relevant capacities and abilities – is held in the minds of agents. In other words, the education of ethical leadership is a collaboration between people who are in or are about to be in positions of real power and those who think deeply and carefully but at a certain distance from the action.

Why have the official schools of the humanities, on the whole, not been the ones to grasp this opportunity?

Think of the battle cry “Speak truth to power!” It’s an intoxicating slogan – and a misleading ideal. The problem lies in the word “speak.” What about getting power to listen? What about understanding the limitations and difficulties of power? What about learning from the experiences of power? No. The slogan imagines that the work is done when you have said your piece. You can imagine situations in which this is truly heroic, or when it is the only thing to be done. Or when magically the pure voice of truth carries a great public with it and so becomes the rallying point for serious progress. But such scenarios are far removed from the realities of life in a market-based liberal economy. There may be much about such societies that could and should be better. But the path to progress doesn’t lie in just telling people that they don’t know the truth.

Still, it would often be more accurate to talk of academic bemusement than arrogance. Bemusement that the styles of thinking, the accumulated knowledge, the subtlety of mind, the refinement of ideas that are so seriously cultivated in the humanities don’t seem to be able to get a greater purchase on the way the world works.

Apart from anxiety about dumbing down there are three longstanding strategic weaknesses of the humanities as they currently operate in higher education. There’s the problem of the career path. In the core humanities there are not a great many jobs on offer. If you look at the résumés of most humanities academics at most Australian universities, it is clear that getting appointed has been a lifelong task. Mostly, people will have undertaken a relevant undergraduate degree; then they will have done a masters degree; then a PhD. Since a PhD is almost never sufficient for an ongoing post, they will have had various postdoctoral appointments, writing papers and gradually arming themselves for an ongoing position. In other words, between the ages of about nineteen and thirty-two an individual will have had to have made intense continuous effort in order to be competitive for full employment in a humanities department in a permanent post. In my own field, philosophy, only one or two people are raised to professorial level each year. A successful career in the academic humanities requires a lifelong devotion to your subject.

This means that such academics are extremely unlikely to have had significant experience of work outside this structure, other than casual jobs. This is a problem, because – as I’ve been insisting – the true home of the humanities is in the world, not in the academy. The collective experience that humanities academics bring to their work is a base from

which to reach out to the world. If that experiential base is too small, or too unusual, it won't be possible to reach out in an authentic or compelling manner.

Another entrenched obstacle can be seen in the political culture of the humanities. Recently I was chatting with a colleague I rather like but don't know all that well. He happened to mention that his politics are – as he put it – far to the left. I have nothing against his opinion. But it struck me as significant that he felt very relaxed mentioning it. He spoke as if it were obvious that I would be sympathetic, although I have never said anything on such matters to him. His ease was a symptom of the pervasive culture of the humanities. It's just assumed that you are on the left, unless you go out of your way to explain otherwise.

It's completely fine – and an expression of intellectual freedom – that individual academics should be able to come to more or less any conclusions about the tasks of government, so long as they don't preach to the students. This principle is securely established. But there is too much consensus among people in the humanities. It is a political monoculture. There are a few exceptions, no doubt. But they really are exceptions.

The monoculture closes off the potential for wider sympathy. A lot of the most successful people I know have no engagement at all with the humanities. The disciplines do not seem to recognise their aspirations, or speak to their ambitions. Such people have a huge impact on the world. I know it will sound strange, even ridiculous – and this is a symptom of our problem – to say that one of the primary tasks of the humanities is to teach grace and dignity to those who are materially successful in the world. This isn't to do with recruiting them to philanthropy (“tell your friends in business to give us their money” is a phrase that sticks in my mind). When I meet a well-off couple whose idea of heaven is watching Formula One, seeing a celebrity at a flashy restaurant and talking about real estate prices, I see the failure of the humanities. The materially successful set the standard for a lot of other people.

There's an anecdote in Tolstoy about a soldier who reads up on the aphorisms of Lichtenberg so as to be able to hold his own at a society soiree. Reactions to this little story are a test of attitude. Does it hint at a criterion of success for the humanities or does it represent their degradation? I think that capturing the imagination of the successful is an essential task; but I feel lonely with this thought.

The third weakness is the idea of the peer group – which is very closely connected to research. Martha Nussbaum seems to take it for granted that research in the humanities will automatically advance the educational project for which she argues. But the connection is not clear. It is not at all obvious that most – or even very much – research has any bearing upon her concerns. For instance, education in critical thinking is already perfectly possible – and could be well supplied on the basis of existing knowledge. We could do with a better understanding of how people learn, of cognitive biases, and of the kinds of exercises and examples that are the most efficient from a pedagogical point of view. But this doesn't sound much like the kind of research humanities academics typically do, or want to do, or are trained to do.

The academic peer group is unrepresentative of the people we need to reach. At its best, the peer group functions as quality control. But it surreptitiously does something else as well. It becomes the target audience. And this is the opposite of what we need. We get good at impressing one another but we need to impress people who are not part of the academic circle.

And we need to do this not as an amateur, optional add-on, as something we do in our leisure time, distinct from our core business. In the 1950s and '60s, when the present professional humanities system started to crystallise – around the ideas of the PhD, research and peer group review – there was limited competition in ideas. High culture was the ruling culture. Today, the circulation of ideas is a professional business. Humanities academics live in a competitive marketplace of content. This is dismaying, because idiotic ideas often get prominence while thoughtful, serious contributions are ignored. We could try to protect ourselves, and withdraw from competition. Perhaps government or philanthropists could be persuaded to shield the humanities from the demotic fray. That would be comfortable for insiders. But it would be terrible for everyone else.

This is the essential question for the humanities: can elegance of mind, subtle reasonableness, care for the logic of argument, nobility of spirit ever hold their own in the wider world? Or can these be pursued only in protected, enclosed environments?

If the humanities are to hold their own we have to face competition; we have to get exceptionally good – not amateurishly good – at engagement. When humanities academics approach a problem like decoding Hegel's *Phenomenology* or understanding the reception of Byron's poetry in nineteenth-century France, there is no limit to the ingenuity, effort

and intelligence devoted to the task. There's no amateurism there. No sense of "who knows, perhaps this will work;" every possibility is examined, every resource deployed.

The urgent problem now isn't that we can't follow Hegel's convoluted sentences or that we are woefully ignorant of what Byron meant to Balzac; our problem is that we live in a world that doesn't know how to be serious about serious things.

For the humanities to gain a central, powerful position in the world (as I believe they should) the politics and pragmatics of communication need to become matters of intense professional focus – and not as theories, but as things we do superbly well. Not just a little better.

The idea of the peer group holds a key to the reformation and renaissance of the humanities. If "peer" could be redefined, the situation would change – and government, administrators and academics could, in concert, achieve this. "Peer" simply indicates whose opinion about value you pay attention to. A top-tier journal is identified by asking which journal insiders hold in most esteem. We should say, instead, that the humanities need to win the esteem of outsiders. Therefore, the greatest prestige should track wider esteem. "Top-tier" could be recast to require significant external interest. We should aim to combine a high level of cognitive sophistication with the achievement of real enthusiasm and interest from a broader constituency.

So we need to listen to and take seriously the responses of people who are not already devotees or insiders. They are peers in the sense that we have to treat them as equals. If that were done we would orient effort in the humanities towards the proper goals. Thus, a PhD should have a non-academic examiner; appointments committees should have non-academic members; journals should have non-academic reviewers. We have to break with the idea that the humanities are or should be structured like sciences (scholarship is the science of the humanities). The goal of the humanities is the creation of knowledge and ways of thinking that are found useful by others, and academics cannot be the final judges of whether this has been achieved or not. A good analogy would be that the humanities seek "technologies" of living and thinking. Technology requires an underlying science, but the science alone isn't sufficient. You need an intense focus on what works for people, on what needs they have (or could be persuaded to recognise). The interface needs the greatest care.

The idea that the humanities should be useful has proved to be something of a stumbling block. But this is for superficial rather than deep reasons. In 2005 I was appointed Knowledge Transfer Fellow at the University of Melbourne. Knowledge Transfer was a statement of general intent: university teaching and research should develop more purposeful and more creative relationships with thinking needs, and thinking strengths, of the economy and civil society. The details in the humanities were not at first clear. The response seemed panicky. It took the form of grasping at random applications of existing research.

I don't want to be harsh about any of the well-intended projects, but I do want to analyse the difficulty involved. So I'll invent an example that serves to illustrate a generic problem. Some famous paintings express tranquillity and peace of mind. And there are times when such feelings might be much sought-after – perhaps in a dentist's waiting room. (My local practitioner has an unfortunate interest in works that convey anguish and despairing rage.) So you could project a Knowledge Transfer research program that places images by Claude Lorraine or Mark Rothko in stressful environments and studies the impact on people's condition of mind.

I don't mean to be down on such a project, but it has an air of desperation about it. It takes some of the noblest and grandest achievements of the western imagination but employs their lowliest strengths. Works that aspire to reveal perfect beauty or instil awe are used to reduce transient tension. It's as if the project is saying: we have given up hope that the grander significance of these things could ever be powerful in the world; but we have to find some utility; anything will do.

This is the reverse of an equal but opposite problem that has, at other times, been evident in the humanities. I recall several occasions when cultural historians have tried to persuade me that neoclassical architecture is the advance guard of fascism. Here, the intellectual is saving the modern world from right-wing tyranny. But the salvation is faked because the threat is unreal.

Actually, the whole episode of critical radicalism that gripped the centre of the humanities for about twenty years under the banner of Theory suffered from exactly this inflated and unreal sense of significance. Put harshly, Theory said to the world: you are stupid and wrong about everything; you won't be able to understand why (read a page of what we write – I guarantee you will find it incomprehensible); now treat us with honour and pay for us. The hatred of the "bourgeois" world was palpable, and yet it was taken for granted that this hatred should be funded by the

state. This arrogance broke a fundamental principle of social relationships: if you want to influence people you have to gain their trust; if you want to be understood you have to speak a language people understand.

Over-modesty and grandiosity have a common theme. Each struggles to find an appropriate idea of utility for what it is concerned with. Each difficulty has a common cause. They start from existing lines of research and discussion, and seek some outlet for that work.

Rather than searching for niche markets for existing interests, we should follow a very different path. The humanities should start from core questions, great questions – and these should be framed practically. Instead of asking “what is rationality” we should start with “how can public rationality be improved.” The practical question embraces the conceptual one – you need to know what rationality is if you want to get more of it. Or “how can the arts help people live better lives” – which includes the questions “what is art” and “how should we understand the art of the past,” but sets these within a consequential framework.

So, the attempt to solve the great questions leads out directly into purposeful engagement with the wider world. The great questions orchestrate intellectual effort and drive it to practical projects, and to interdisciplinary collaboration. But the collaboration is purposeful – it doesn’t start with an institutional worry (how can we get disciplines to work together); it starts with a real problem which needs collaboration.

The most confusing idea about the value of the humanities – which has gained many adherents in recent times – is that they are valuable for their own sake. The argument runs: people say that the humanities lack instrumental value and that, therefore, they should not receive public subsidy.

Let’s concede (for this stage of the discussion) that, quite often, the humanities are weak on instrumental value. Let us suppose that their contribution to growing the economy, creating jobs, improving medical services, increasing national security or promoting social inclusion is tenuous. But this is not a problem – it is said – because they have another kind of value: intrinsic value. And their possession of intrinsic value justifies public support.

It may not be easy to spell out any powerful, quantifiable practical benefits that follow from appreciating Titian’s paintings, reading *The Critique of Pure Reason*, grasping the influence of Turgenev on Henry James or knowing about court politics in the reign of Charles I (to take

traditional themes), or comparing the imagined body in different vampire films, speculating on “why there is something rather than nothing,” decoding symbolist poetry or tracing the gendered politics of politeness in eighteenth-century France. But that doesn’t matter. The value of these pursuits is intrinsic.

Is this a good argument? We need to clarify a few points. What, exactly, is intrinsic value? Do the humanities actually have it? And, if so, how does this translate into a claim upon public subsidy? The central way of conceptualising intrinsic value is: anything is experienced as possessing intrinsic value to the extent that the appreciation of that thing does not depend upon further benefits which may flow from it. On this view it is certainly correct to say that the humanities have intrinsic value. But this is not, in fact, to say very much. For intrinsic value is ubiquitous. All entertainment, all hobbies, most social intercourse, all interior decoration and most holidays (to start the list) are pursued primarily for their own sake, without their enjoyment depending upon consequent benefits. Intrinsic value is not a rare or elusive phenomenon. We do not use the term in ordinary conversation, but practical life is deeply interwoven with, and organised to serve, the enjoyment of intrinsic value.

One person thinks it would be nice to spend an afternoon walking in the hills; another wants to read *The Critique of Pure Reason*; a third is going to bake bread; a fourth is heading to the pub with some friends. All are in pursuit of intrinsic value: they like these things “for their own sake.” Why should just one of these be singled out for public subsidy (other than that fact that it is the least popular)? We could, after all, think well of the reading project – just as we could think well of the other projects – without regarding it as requiring any kind of public intervention.

The “intrinsic value” defence of the humanities is coy. It’s of no significance in debates about higher education merely to note that some activities happen to be liked for their own sake by some people. The decisive claim needs to be much grander, and is more difficult to defend. You would have to claim that the humanities possess an exceptional degree of intrinsic value – so great that societies should go out of their way to foster such experiences and should maintain institutions expressly for the purpose of cultivating these experiences.

Such justification was undertaken in the 1950s and ’60s by Frank Raymond Leavis. He developed an account of the humanities – with English literature at its core, but spreading widely – that stressed the idea of quality of consciousness. Leavis had no doubt that appreciating Jane

Austen's view of life, or coming to share the sensibility of Henry James, was of tremendous intrinsic value, far beyond the level of other experiences we may happen to enjoy for their own sake. He made intense efforts to justify these claims. He tried to show how lesser enjoyments arise from shallow and self-destructive inclinations. He waged war on contemporary culture, which he regarded as corrupt and corrupting. He developed techniques of teaching that were designed to educate the student's inner life to a pitch of concentrated sincerity and sensitivity – necessary requirements, he believed, for an encounter with the highest degrees of intrinsic value. He was a tireless public advocate of such an education.

Leavis – it hardly needs to be said – has been completely disowned by the humanities. It is the humanities that have preached the idea that enjoying a novel by Tolstoy is no finer an experience than watching an ad; that it is only a prejudice to suppose that Montaigne is a better writer or deeper thinker than Dan Brown. Such views make any “intrinsic value” defence hypocritical. All the effort would need to go into convincing people of entirely the reverse propositions. Namely, that activities and preferences are radically unequal, that some are much more worthy than others and, therefore, deserving of special protection and effort. Today, the intrinsic value defence of the humanities is panicked and insubstantial. Fearing being judged on utilitarian grounds, supporters of the humanities clutch at a non-instrumental notion of value. But they have not, for a long time, taken the pursuit and honouring of non-instrumental value as their core purpose.

Any sustained, ambitious attempt to justify the humanities on the grounds of their intrinsic value has to be pursued along the lines Leavis sketched out. That is, you would have to make the claim that some experiences are far finer and deeper than others, and that popular opinion has no authority on what these experiences are. If popular opinion happened to be right about the highest levels of intrinsic value there would be no need for special state institutions: the free market would be the best provider. Obviously we don't need any special institutions to support the enjoyment of Harry Potter. It would be easy to conduct research, analyse the plots and characters, and speculate about social ideology. But none of this is necessary for the appreciation of the intrinsic value of the Potter books – they have been widely enjoyed already, for their own sake. So if you care about intrinsic value, in terms of popular opinion, you would quite cheerfully abolish the literature courses of universities, and leave things to Amazon and the publishing industry. Anyone who believes that there is no difference of intrinsic merit between

popular culture and high culture should reject the intrinsic value argument as providing any justification for the academic humanities. Because, from that point of view, the academic humanities are redundant, or just a support system for a minority hobby.

In other words, the intrinsic value defence of the humanities requires an additional premise: high intrinsic value is real, even when unacknowledged. It requires the belief that there can be genuine leadership towards experiences which are of great value for their own sake, but which most people (and the open market) would miss if left to themselves. The humanities as practised today run away from these claims. They want the conclusion (we are special) but not the premises (intrinsic value is hierarchical, unequal).

Let me put my cards on the table. I believe that one of the deepest tasks of the humanities is to seek out, secure and maintain the highest forms of intrinsic value, and to promote the widest possible public devotion to such values. But this is a call to reform the humanities. It is not, in fact, what the humanities do, nor is it what they are set up to do. The humanities systematically reject the idea of high intrinsic value and thereby saw off one of the branches on which they could sit.

Consider these statements by distinguished humanities academics, reflecting on the value of their disciplines: “Latin serves to train the mind; it is not merely that one learns to read particular ancient texts: one learns to weigh the meaning of a word, to grasp how words come together to form meaningful sentences; one learns to think.” And: “Long after students have forgotten the details of the French Revolution, they will continue to know how to express their own views clearly and powerfully; they will have developed the skill of weighing evidence, of assessing the views of others, of taking a long view of complex events: these qualities will serve them well in life.”

These statements advance the view that the value of the humanities does not lie so much in the content they teach as in the qualities of mind they cultivate.

Can we identify the qualities of mind and the resources of character that the humanities seek (or should seek) to cultivate? Some of these qualities of mind and resources of character are not unique to the humanities; but still the humanities may provide for many people the best route to these “virtues.” And it is misleading to isolate the virtues – their full benefit depends upon their interaction with one another.

This list is not exhaustive; but it should include the following.

Mental space (openness of mind, breadth of mind): this is the ability to work productively with – and take seriously – more than one point of view, or concern, at the same time. This matters when several points of view (or lines of thought, or concerns) are relevant to the matter in hand; but when they do not sit well or easily together, they seem opposed – and may actually be. Notions of incompatibility, incommensurability and incongruity describe the various tensions that may exist among points of view.

An open mind is one that can adjust its internal order in the light of a new idea or fact. But there has to be something significant there already to be adjusted. The finer the existing order, the more powerful and impressive a new idea or fact needs to be if it is to call for and sustain this new order. An open mind is one that is ready to absorb any worthy new fact into an existing serious conception of the world. Thus, having an open mind is not a just a matter of willingness to consider any fact or idea (wherever it comes from); even less is it hunger for novelty.

At its best, openness of mind is a kind of courage. It is the capacity to see the power of a thought when you would rather avoid it. This is precisely what is missing in the facile idea of openness as lack of anxiety – “I can consider anything.” “Openness” is a complementary virtue: it is most valuable when combined with a strenuous commitment to logic, hierarchy and evidence.

The ability to learn from the experience and ideas of others: the subject matter of the humanities includes the best that has been thought and said about the human condition, about what has happened in the past, and about what is worthy of care and respect. A great deal of human insight of enduring, if partial, significance is scattered through the traditional materials of the humanities. The hope is that the scattered divergent insights can be retained, accumulated and better understood – and deployed now.

We should be very ambitious here. It’s only a start to say things like “we need to know about the past” or “seeing how women behaved in 1793 changes our ideas about the construction of femininity” or “we need to know how people thought about God in the past.” This “need” should be investigated more stringently. What we need such information for should be at the forefront of enquiry, not tacked on later as an excuse or self-justification – which, frankly, is what it often is in practice.

The understanding and appreciation of values: this has often been seen in a pious and unadventurous light. The aim of the humanities might be

said to be the inculcation of compassion and tolerance – the emotional virtues *du jour*. We should be more adventurous here. Probably, almost everyone who undertakes higher education in the humanities is pretty tolerant and compassionate. The bigger ambition is to look seriously at the values we need the humanities to help with – for instance, the merit of taste (the capacity to see and appreciate beauty). What about the value of maturity: the recognition of inescapable conflicts between goods; the capacity to keep the long-term in view; the strength to say “no” to yourself and others; the readiness to take responsibility for hard decisions that will have negative consequences for some people?

Knowledge and appreciation of values is a kind of fleshing-out. Often the values we have are articulated by vague yet important words – but we don’t much think about or understand what they really come to, or what they mean in practice. This issue is of huge significance outside the humanities.

On a great many questions and issues we ought to have a normative point of view – that is, to regard certain outcomes or practices or objects as good, malign, noble, base, beautiful, ugly, ethical, vicious or admirable. These terms are normative: they express moral judgements. But such terms are vulnerable to misuse and are grounded, at least in part, in subjectivity; they are not scientific. Their relation to evidence is weak; they do not derive their authority (such as it is) from consensus, although they seek consensus. They are not provable, although they are not irrational.

A sophisticated, powerful thinker and agent in the world needs to participate in normative and evaluative points of view. But there is a great difference between merely having an evaluative stance – whatever it may be – and being good at normative thinking.

The process by which you become a fine and successful normative thinker (and agent) can be presented in ideal form: first, you become aware of your own normative attitudes – this is complex, because often you do not notice quite where a normative attitude begins, or what role it is playing. Second, you examine the grounds of this normative attitude; you explore its relationship to evidence and argument; you consider its merits and weaknesses. Third, there is a process of revision in which normative attitudes are refined and reconstructed. Fourth, normative attitudes are deployed in the world. The experience this yields takes you back to the start of the cycle, but at a more sophisticated level. This is only the briefest outline of an immensely complex process.

Such a process flourishes in a culture in which normativity is taken very

seriously – you are ambitious to form fine normative attitudes – and simultaneously good at examining and understanding the possible weaknesses and limitations of normative attitudes. Ideally, this is not a solitary project but is native to a local culture. It cannot be pursued in a purely theoretical environment. You need to draw upon the lessons of experience.

Normative thinking requires the integration of discursive labour and the accumulation of experience. It is one of the most important areas in which we can see the centrality of the idea of lifelong learning.

Learning from experience: the humanities are typically connected with book learning; they involve library and archival research. This is ironic, because the things they deal with (great paintings, great works of fiction, the dramas of history, the ideas created by great philosophers) often have entirely different origins – those achievements were from broad and rich personal experience.

For instance, Goethe worked out what he thought in the interface between book learning and life learning. We should be creative in thinking about how this can be brought into the humanities. The aim is to help students learn from their own experience.

Working up from suggestion to statement: the capacity for clear, logical thinking is one of the most easily understood of educational ambitions. Often what is needed is the capacity to turn informal, suggestive, muddled material (early stage thinking) into a better-organised presentation – so that the relations between ideas can be more easily grasped. This is the capacity to work up an inchoate line of thought (a hunch, an inspiration, a suggestion) into a more mature form.

This might occur when you take a poem and attempt to turn some of its suggestive poetic thinking into prose statements that can be weighed in the light of reason and evidence. What distinguishes really fine achievements of this kind is that they do not lose what is buried in the inchoate thought; they reveal it more clearly. The basic form of this kind of approach asks: what is the potential significance of this suggestion? Our capacity to see what something could mean, or what someone is trying to say, is of great utility.

The capacity to benefit from seeing the weaknesses of your own work (to take risks and be self-critical): it is natural to overestimate the significance and merit of your own ideas. Self-criticism ideally anticipates and internalises a good external critic. It's crucial in the gradual evolution of better versions of ideas and proposals.

But often the ability to see the weaknesses of your thinking is paralysing; you become cautious, dispirited, and rely too much upon

consensus and established patterns. There is a capacity of character, as well as of intellect, which enables an individual to be both self-critical and able to take intellectual and conceptual risks.

This could be developed through the rewriting of exercises and essays, or where the individual student is required to grade their own work; to provide a rationale for the grade; to go back and rewrite the essay or presentation. This could be repeated twenty times if need be. Ideally, this would be done under time pressure – in an open office setting.

The fostering of judgement: a key aspect of judgement is the willingness to assert what is genuinely important in a particular situation. It is at odds with the application of an existing and well-established set of priorities. It involves taking responsibility for your assertion – and hence involves reflecting upon experiences of failure. An interesting strategy here might be to concentrate on intellectual failure (confusions, inability to make progress, lassitude, boredom, pretentiousness).

Healthy impatience: this is the capacity of character, as well as of mind, to push ideas past their current threshold. If everyone is talking about integrity, for instance, your immediate response should be “what is integrity?” and your second response should be “let’s work it out.” It involves recognising the point at which a lot of people have stopped thinking. It is a conviction that we can almost always come up with much better ways of understanding our present concerns. It’s impatience with concepts that don’t deliver what people suppose they do. For instance, talk about innovation rarely recognises the fact that it is a process term (something is new) masquerading as an achievement term (something is better).

The non-reductive simplification of sophisticated material: the humanities contain stunning examples of the powerful, straightforward presentation of immensely sophisticated material, as well as the complex presentation of simple material. One of the main features of life is the need for people with sophisticated ideas to be able to communicate what is central and critical in their thinking to people who won’t grasp the subtleties through lack of time, lack of aptitude or lack of interest.

Such communication should be the finest achievement of sophistication – because it has arrived at such a solid and clear understanding of a complex matter that the point can at last be presented in a straightforward, convincing and helpful way. You go through complexity to simplicity.

The process here is of an ever improving understanding of what the issues actually are – what the claim is, what the rationale is – so that, eventually, it can be presented in a clean and organised and compelling

manner. The relevant exercise might be that of demanding more and more clarification from students in specific set exercises (under time pressure), but with many opportunities to repeat the exercise.

This is a point of difference between the humanities and other disciplines. The best work in the humanities – or the work the humanities deals with – often is simple in presentation (Plato, Tolstoy, Raphael, Mozart, Jane Austen). There are of course great subtleties and sophistications at play, but they are presented straightforwardly. It would be a huge gain for humanity if we could systematically educate people in this capacity.

Confidence in dealing with established misunderstanding: the sources of confidence are twofold. First, the recognition that understanding or explanation isn't a matter of consensus; the fact of consensus isn't compelling in itself. It's simple to state this intellectually. It's a matter of character, however, to be able to use this obvious point in the press of life. But the negative capacity to be independent won't come to much unless it is allied with an ability to engage fruitfully, to deal with, such a consensus. That involves being able to second-guess what the roots of confusion are, to understand the fears or difficulties that are attached to breaking with the established view.

So, in cultivating these capacities, we are not just inculcating heroic oppositional stances. A good question: why might it be attractive or exciting to hold the view opposed to the one you have been arguing for? The aim isn't to teach some particular bit of content. The aim is to inculcate a great quality of mind. So the education should aim at internalising this capacity.

A quality of mind can be seen as both ability and a disposition. An ability names something you can do. A disposition names something you tend to do.

The aim, then, of humanities education – in this sense – is to cultivate dispositions: the reliable, intelligent deployment of abilities in real-world situations. It is the ability to think carefully – when under pressure, when there are strong countervailing forces, when there is a need to do so, in the service of an important purpose.

What would be the consequences for the humanities if they took the cultivation of such dispositions of mind as their central purpose? It would mean radical revision of teaching. If the point of studying the French Revolution is not so much to accumulate knowledge about that

event as to develop abilities to think effectively about complex processes, the emphasis in teaching and assessment should be on those qualities of mind as needed in other situations. If we've learned something about a complex process, let's try using it on something other than the French Revolution. And in research, qualities of mind would stand as the principle of evaluation.

I was recently talking to an engineering student and the conversation happened to turn to ethics. I was surprised by how confidently she handled the topics: she had a well-informed view about utilitarianism and its strengths and weaknesses. Having, in the past, often taught introductory courses on ethics, I was rather envious of her lecturer. I feared that few of my students would have come away with such a good education. How had she come to understand all this? She explained that she'd been watching a series of lectures on YouTube by the Harvard philosopher Michael Sandal. The lectures were so good, she said, it was like watching a brilliant documentary.

There's no reason why all lecturing should not be provided in this way. A hundred or so superb communicators could take over the whole of that task. The more intimate aspect of education – the cultivation of capacities – would then be the primary focus of teaching.

The stakes are high. We need the humanities to flourish. But this will require reformation: the humanities need to become more eloquent, more focused on other people, more adept at facing competition, more connected to the economy, more sympathetic to aspiration.

If we will it, this is not the twilight of the humanities: it is early morning. We have to shake off our dogmatic slumbers.

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