

# Need humanities be so useless? Justifying the place and role of humanities as a critical resource for performance and practice

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Justifying the existence, position, and relevance of academic humanities scholarship may be difficult in the face of chronic practical needs in health care. Such scholarship may seem parasitic on human activity and performance that directly contributes to human wellbeing and health care. Here, a possible and partial justification for the importance of scholarship in the humanities as a critical resource for practice and performance is undertaken by two humanities scholars. Human identity and emotion are reflected and defined by performances, both in the traditional disciplines of the humanities, such as art and literature, and in the sciences and medicine. The critical attitude that such performances might inadvertently undermine is sustained by the humanities. The humanities disciplines ask the question: “What is it to be human?” Uncritical emotion and expression, arising, for example, from understanding developments in medicine and science, which might exclude or corrupt much that is of value in the healthcare sector and other areas of practical performance, can be constrained by this.

someone to spend several million pounds of public money on—for example—the restoration of ancient scriptural texts just because “I like historical texts”, as a well endowed scholar said to one of us recently? It is surely reasonable that humanities scholars should reflect on the nature of their practices and account for themselves and their activities to those in other walks of life whose work appears more overtly useful.

It is important in a journal like this one that humanities scholars should face the challenges posed by the practice of health care and medicine and explain themselves properly, rather than assuming that those in medicine and health care need to be “converted” to taking humanities seriously, modifying their more philistine attitudes, polishing their conversational skills and manners, deepening the cultural hinterland, or enjoying a kind of non-instrumental breathing space in a ratio-instrumental world of utility and action. Humanities scholars should persuade practitioners to take our disciplines, and the contribution that performers and analysts in arts and humanities offer, seriously. Medical humanities, however, should not simply consist of the transfer of “good” and “delightful” arts and humanities to the situation and practice of health care. It should be a place where humanities disciplines, too, are subject to hard questioning and, perhaps, fundamental change.

Thus, it is important that humanities scholars begin to articulate what they are about, and what they really might contribute to the common weal. It is not good enough just to “like what we do”, to say that it gives us and some others pleasure as an end in itself, or to globally assert that people’s lives are immeasurably (but non-specifically) enriched by encounters with the arts and humanities. Nor does it behoove us to justify our work and existence on the utilitarian, instrumental basis that it contributes to the leisure economy (book publishing, films, theatres, etc), or that it provides students with transferable skills such as writing and analysis.

All these factors are important; they have much validity for humanities scholars and for those who believe in their right to exist. None of them, however, really justifies our place in UK public institutions in the face of other, more urgent and immediate, priorities facing fellow citizens. Some questions need to be answered in the face of continuing shortfalls and crises in the provision of basic health care. What do humanities disciplines really distinctively offer to all the citizens of our country and the world? Why

The Welsh National Health Service is in a financial crisis. It has not even begun to provide many essential services—for example, there is no service at all for people with eating disorders in Wales. In the context of an impoverished country with inadequate services, it might seem indulgent to promote the importance of the humanities in medicine. Outside the context of the medical humanities, we may also ask: “How is it possible to justify the activities of a humanities scholar studying artistic and other kinds of performance in an ‘ivory tower’, when the money used to support this kind of endeavour could be used to remedy health inequalities and meet the real needs of our fellow citizens?”

The salaries of a few humanities academics would not go far toward filling the financial hole in the Welsh National Health Service. The reality of healthcare inequalities, injustices, and shortfalls in the wider social context, however, rightly poses uncomfortable moral challenges for humanities scholars, especially because we like to think of ourselves as dealing in values and somehow enriching, adding to, and preserving value in culture and society. Is it right for

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should they continue to exist? What would be missed if they were abolished, or allowed to become a matter of private consumer choice for those who have the money, leisure, and interest to pursue them?

In this paper, we begin to explore one direction for possible partial answers to the value and place of humanities disciplines in worlds beyond the arts faculty to move the discussion about the value of humanities disciplines beyond unanswerable rhetoric and faith affirmations from the disciplines' party faithful with their preconceived opinions. We should acknowledge at the outset that this paper focuses primarily on the nature of humanities and not on their direct use and application in medicine or in healthcare practice. Although we will make reference to these areas where appropriate and try to suggest occasional inferences and examples, here we are attempting a general justification of the possible value of humanities disciplines to practices. This might seem somewhat oblique to the main concerns of readers of *The Journal of Medical Humanities*. Without this kind of basic scrutiny of the nature of humanities, however, their apparently straightforward, unproblematic involvement in healthcare practice may remain somewhat uncritical. This, then, is a contribution to the theory and self understanding of humanities disciplines, with inferences for their use in healthcare theory and practice, and not a straightforward performance of the application of the methods, approaches, and insights of humanities disciplines to health care.

We begin by trying to become clearer about what the humanities disciplines are. Thereafter, we ask: "What is the value of the humanities?" and consider some of the critical points that might be advanced against their continued existence. After acknowledging the validity of some of the criticisms, we begin a positive defence of the humanities. Finally, we conclude that the main role for the humanities is in providing a space and methods for beginning to ask what is really intrinsically valuable for humans of all kinds seeking to create a world in which they can live and flourish. Although artistic performances can reflect human identity and emotion, the humanities contribute to sustaining the critical attitude that artistic performances (and, indeed, religious belief) might inadvertently undermine. The humanities, whatever their limits, can help us reflect on who and what we are and on what we might become, constraining unthinking and unbridled emotion and expression that might in itself exclude much that is of value. The ability to engage in imaginative, critical, and disciplined argumentation about ends, meanings, and purposes for people is important for framing all kinds of human endeavour. This means, as the idea of medical humanities suggests, that the theory, provision, and practice of health care, among other scientifically based activities, must be of concern to humanities scholars. Although this conclusion is not dramatic, it is significant in the context of the journey that has been undertaken to arrive at it.

## WHAT ARE THE HUMANITIES?

An ostensive definition of the humanities would point to a bundle of disciplines, with perhaps the theory of literature (art and possibly musicology), history (including the history of ideas and of the various arts), theology and philosophy at the core. They are then joined by their modern (or postmodern) offspring: cultural studies; religious studies; visual studies; postcolonial studies, and feminist studies. A slightly more questionable place might then be given to social sciences such as cultural anthropology, sociology, and social psychology.

All the disciplines mentioned are presumably concerned with humanity. We suggest that they are united in asking one important question, albeit often implicitly, namely

"What is it to be human?" Within the humanities, this question—the question of how human beings understand, experience, and practise their own humanity—is typically addressed indirectly, by looking at the products of human existence, including language, beliefs, writings, paintings, and social institutions and organisations.

This concern with human self understanding and its expression immediately distinguishes the humanities from sciences such as physical anthropology, human genetics and some subdisciplines of medicine, which examine the human being as a physical, biological, and chemical entity.

Here, perhaps, is the main point. The results of the natural sciences are validated against what are taken to be pre-existent and objective realities, existing quite independently of what human beings, individually or collectively, may commonly think about them. Blood flowed about the human body regardless of Hooke's discoveries; the human genome had a specific sequence long before that sequence was mapped.

By contrast, the humanities respond to what humans understand to be the answer to the question, "What is it to be human?" whether this understanding is articulated explicitly, or is only implicit and manifest in their actions and creativity. The humanities investigate the inhabited meaning world, both past and present. The question of what it is physically to be human can be included here—this is the subject matter of the history of medicine. Elsewhere, the question may be pursued in terms of what it is to be human as a spiritual being, a political being, an economic being, perhaps even a musical being, and so on.

The grounding contention of the humanities is that the products of human existence, be they artworks, belief systems, political structures, or even sciences and technologies, are shaped by and expressive of some deeper beliefs about what humans are, and also about what humans ought to be. We study these products of human existence to discover what the producers thought (or took for granted) about the human condition.

The two thinkers who perhaps most fundamentally articulated the distinction between the sciences and the humanities are Giambattista Vico (1668–1744) and Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911). Both of them highlight the difference between history and natural science. The natural sciences explain a nature that is alien to humanity. Nature is not created by humanity; thus, we can only establish the laws according to which nature operates, and never the reason or meaning behind its operation. That is the preserve of a divine creator. In contrast, history studies human action (where again human action is not mere physical behaviour but rather meaningful actions, experienced and interpreted by historically embedded human agents). History is therefore not something that is alien to human beings. The task of the historian is not then to explain historical events (reducing them to causal regularities), but rather to interpret them. History, unlike nature, has a meaning, because the historian, unlike the scientist, is the creator of the very thing that he or she studies.<sup>1</sup>

## WHAT IS THE VALUE OF THE HUMANITIES?

The present age is dominated by instrumental reason, as thinkers like Max Weber, Jürgen Habermas, and Alasdair MacIntyre have argued.<sup>2–4</sup> The humanities seem to have little or no instrumental purpose compared—for example—with physics, chemistry and biology. Thus, it is difficult to justify their existence.

The humanities do not obviously add to national income, increase national or global security, or even allow people to live happier or better lives. At best, perhaps they might develop "transferable skills" in students, such as the ability

to read critically and write clearly and creatively. Such skills might benefit the middle manager, the journalist, and the doctor in communication with the patient. (At worst, they teach rhetorical tricks through which people may be manipulated in advertising, in the news media, or in eliciting informed consent.) It is precisely because such skills are interpretative rather than explanatory that they do not seem to allow us to exert any pressure on reality (be this physical, social, or psychological reality) to make the world different. Making sense of the sequence of events that led up to the Great Depression will not obviously prevent further economic crises. Similarly, understanding Velazquez's intentions in creating *Las Meninas* will not obviously enable us to create anything of similar worth.

A caveat may be entered here. This concerns disciplines that rest uneasily on the borderline between the humanities and the sciences, such as sociology and economics. The social sciences are concerned with regularities in social life. Put more bluntly, they are often concerned with moments when social life confronts the very human beings who actively create and sustain it as something alien and natural—as a Durkheimian social fact.<sup>5</sup> Economics is the paradigm of the pursuit of such regularity and facticity. It has generated endless mathematical models of social behaviour and used them with some success to predict and manipulate human economic action. Knowing the causes of the depression of the 1930s, and being able to formulate those causes into a model of consumer, private industrial, and government action, may indeed help forestall future depressions in a way in which a mere narrative history of the Great Depression could not.

A social science that is oriented toward causal explanation, even if of “second nature” rather than of first nature, is therefore useful. But this only serves to highlight the problem of the utility of the core humanities disciplines. What is the point of writing a history of the Great Depression that will pursue some elusive meaning that it may have, when we can more fruitfully subject it to economic modelling, and then use that information to prevent future hardship and social instability? (This question has a direct relevance to the medical humanities. It again raises the spectre that they are little but a self indulgent luxury, asking practically useless questions about the meaning of medicine (or medical history) and diverting resources from the real work that will serve to cure and prevent disease and suffering.)

This problem can be put in another way: are the humanities inherently conservative? Taking history as the core example of the humanities, they seem simply to look backwards, to make sense of what has already happened. In contrast (and C P Snow made this point forcefully in his account of the “Two Cultures”), the natural sciences look forward, seeking practical means to make possible new interventions into the natural (and in the case of economics, the social) world, which will make the human lot a happier one.<sup>6</sup> The instrumentalism of the natural sciences seems to be the way in which human problems are to be resolved. (The 2005 BBC Reith lecturer Alec Broers defended this position at length.)<sup>7</sup>

From this perspective, the humanities may appear to be a self indulgent luxury. Their pursuit may provide a good deal of pleasure, just as there is pleasure in wandering round a ruined monastery wondering what life there was like in the 15th century. But they are the sort of thing that more serious minded people should engage in only in their leisure time. At best, if the humanities do have a purpose, it is in their contribution to the leisure and heritage industries. The valuable humanities scholars then are those like historian Simon Schama, art historian Andrew Graham-Dixon, and archaeologist Mick Aston, who contribute to the mass media;

the English literature scholars whose book reviews inform and stimulate reading groups; or those numerous employees of the National Trust and the National Museums and Galleries of Wales, who sustain the quality and diversity of Welsh tourism. The unsettling question raised by the leisure and media industries for those who regard humanities as disciplines—in the sense of *Wissenschaften*, disciplined forms of inquiry—is whether it matters if Schama is a good historian, providing that he is entertaining. Put otherwise, what meaning can good have here, other than being entertaining? Again, if we relate this question to the medical humanities, what are they other than a leisurely distraction from the real work of diagnosing and curing? How can they be adjudged to be good, other than in the sense that people (including perhaps hospital patients) find in them an entertaining commentary or even distraction. At best, good medical humanities may, instrumentally, contribute to better scores in patient satisfaction surveys, even if they do nothing for the efficacy of medical treatments.

From the instrumental point of view, the vast academic structure of the humanities is primarily justifiable as a means for generating a few media stars (and here we may add to our list the likes of Jonathan Miller and Lord Winston) and a better quality of leisure. Yet the complexity of that academic structure, its tendency to be dismissive of the very stars it has created, and to denigrate the popularisation and communication of humanities disciplines may suggest that it is a highly ineffective means to the achievement of that end. Moreover, the occasional media stars who emerge are unrepresentative of most practitioners of the humanities. The clarity and certainty of their communication contrasts with the complexity and obscurity of debates within the humanities. Technical terms such as “deconstruction” leak out into popular language in forms that have little or nothing to do with their original meanings. Furthermore, humanities scholars rarely, if ever, speak with a single voice or pursue a single agenda. This diversity, highly valued within academic humanities, is confusing and unwelcome to the non-specialist audience. Debate and dissension within the natural sciences are equally unsettling. They undermine our trust in the instrumental efficiency of science. If medical researchers cannot agree on the side effects of vaccines, the likelihood of “flu” pandemics, or the desirability or otherwise of drinking red wine, then how are we lay people to organise our lives? Within the humanities, the problem differs only slightly. Debate within the humanities muddles the useful and clear meanings that they are supposed to bestow on their popular audience. The ruins of the medieval monastery need to make sense to us as we walk round them, and it is the job of the humanities to do that.

One final criticism of the humanities may be considered. They are ultimately parasitic on other, more important, creative, imaginative, and worthwhile activities. Research in the humanities begins only when other humans have created something. It is this “something” that is of value, be it a religious ritual, an artwork, a war, or a scientific theory. It is not clear what the humanities contribute to the value of these creations.

In summary, we would then note that if the humanities themselves have little or no instrumental justification, they would probably not be able to provide an instrumental justification for a belief or an artwork. As the American painter Barnett Newman is supposed to have observed: “Aesthetics is for art what ornithology is for the birds”.

We can pursue this even further, and suggest that the humanities may serve to kill off a naive enthusiasm for, and wonder at, their subject matter. They may appear, carelessly and unwittingly, to dissect the nightingale to discover the secret of its song and unweave the rainbow to show that it is

no more than moisture droplets refracting light. Elkins writes thus of the “poison well of art history”:

Now I feel almost nothing for the picture. I can recapture part of what I once felt, but the intensity is gone, and so is my conviction. Once I was transfixed by a world where every ordinary object glinted in a half-sacred light. Now I can't quite see that...I put the blame for this squarely at the feet of art history. Over the years I read more about Bellini, and about the painting, and my attraction to it was one of the reasons I eventually went on to study Renaissance art. Yet each time I learned something new, I lost a little of what I had felt before.<sup>8</sup>

## IN DEFENCE OF THE HUMANITIES

If what was suggested in the section above has any validity, there is an inherent problem in the instrumental justification of the humanities. The dangers of intellectual snobbery, whereby it is all too easy to dismiss Schama, Miller, and popularising “media dons”, for “dumbing down”, should be recognised. The pressing epistemological, moral, and political concerns that lie behind the criticisms based on instrumentalism must, however, also be recognised. Although instrumental justifications have an important place (especially, as we have suggested, in the context of a cash strapped health service), to justify the humanities in purely instrumental terms would be to capitulate to the sort of emotivism that is attacked by MacIntyre,<sup>4</sup> or “decisionism”, as it is called by Habermas (Habermas,<sup>3</sup> pp 62–80). This would be a realm in which, at least with respect to the arts, only subjective opinion would matter. The good would be that which gives pleasure; as such, it could be measured by eliciting the individual emotional responses of members of an audience or of consumers. What would matter would be the pleasure or satisfaction that the consumer experienced. This satisfaction would crucially not be open to further debate or rational criticism. On such an account, Ellis Peters's Brother Cadfael novels would be as good a source of knowledge about 12th century England as volume three of the *Oxford History of England*, and good medical humanities would be those that register positively on patient satisfaction surveys.

To counter by claiming that the humanities have intrinsic value is disingenuous, unless one can articulate and justify the notion of “intrinsic value”, and do so in the face of instrumentalism and emotivism (where perhaps only personal pleasure has any self evident intrinsic value). This can be pressed further to suggest that the most basic task of the humanities is to articulate and defend this notion, both for their own sake and also for the sake of the very activities on which they are parasitic. The humanities will justify their own parasitism if they can explain why religion, art, and even scientific inquiry are important, regardless of any personal pleasure they may yield. If this can be done, then the criteria by which we judge good (medical) humanities scholarship will be more subtle and richer than a mere appeal to subjective preferences and pleasures.

A classic attempt to justify intrinsic value is found in Kant's teleology.<sup>9</sup> In particular, his justification of art and beauty seems to respond to this problem. Kant distinguishes craft from (fine) art precisely through the distinction between the extrinsic and the intrinsic. The craft object has an extrinsic purpose. It may therefore be assessed in terms of its efficiency in realising that purpose. A scalpel should have a sharp and effective cutting blade, should be easy to handle with precision, easy to sterilise, and so on. As an instrument or tool, little, if anything, else matters. The craft worker can then be trained in the technology that will most effectively

bring about these instrumental qualities. In drawing the contrast between craft and fine art, Kant argues that the artist creating an object of beauty does not follow any pre-given rules. Artistic creativity can be acquired only through a process of cultivation, whereby the potential artist is exposed to objects of beauty. It cannot be gained through training in technical skills.

For Kant, the object of beauty has no extrinsic purpose. It is an object of contemplation that gives us an aesthetic pleasure unique to the experience of beauty (as opposed to the feeling of agreeableness that the use and consumption of instrumentally valuable objects gives us). Pleasure has nothing to do with extrinsic ends. We enjoy the object of beauty for the sake of that enjoyment alone. In fact, strictly, we do not enjoy the object itself. The judgment of taste is subjective for Kant. So we do not enjoy an intrinsic property of the object. Rather, we enjoy the play of our cognitive and moral powers as they encounter the mere form of the object before them, unhampered by extrinsic goals. The intrinsic value that matters is that of being human. Despite his subjectivism, Kant can use this claim to avoid the problem of emotivism. He argues that judgments of beauty are universal and necessary. The experience of pleasure before beauty is not grounded in the cognitive and other mental faculties of the particular spectator, but in those of the human being as such. All humans therefore ought to share the same aesthetic taste (Kant,<sup>9</sup> pp 18–22).

Kant had to turn to the question of human nature, and the dignity of the human being as a rational and moral creature, to justify the claim that beauty has intrinsic value. In effect, the justification of the value of beauty (and art) presupposes a prior question about the nature of humanity and thus what has been suggested to be the core question of the humanities. Kant responds to this question by appealing to a human nature that is, in its most important aspect, placed outside history and culture. The next generation of philosophers, with Schelling and Hegel at their head, challenged precisely this aspect of Kantianism, in effect asking about the historical origins and the future of the Kantian subject.

The philosophy of art of R G Collingwood offers a further lead in this inquiry.<sup>10</sup> Collingwood's aesthetics reworks Kant's distinction between the extrinsic purposefulness of craftwork and the intrinsic purposefulness of artworks. Collingwood is, however, also a Hegelian. He is sensitive to historical change and cultural diversity. Thus, his account of what it is to be human includes social existence as fundamental. One more component of Collingwood's philosophical make up may be noted. He is the inheritor of British empiricism and, most importantly, of Hume's account of human perception (Collingwood,<sup>10</sup> pp 157–71).

Hume suggests that humans have what might be called a dual level awareness of their world. On one level, we encounter the facts of that world. We see objects, people, and events. On the other level, we evaluate those facts. More or less violently, we are drawn to them or repelled by them (or perhaps just indifferent to them). So, an object of beauty gives me pleasure and I am attracted to it, a violent act repels me, and office memos just bore me.

Collingwood ties together Kant, Hume, and Hegel in his explanation and justification of art. For Collingwood, like Kant, an artwork has intrinsic value. This value is not to be justified by appealing to a universal human nature, but by appealing to a socially embedded human nature. The work of art does not then provide Kant's uniquely aesthetic, and disinterested, pleasure. Rather, it serves to articulate the otherwise inchoate emotional responses that we have in our encounter with real objects and events. In effect, the artwork makes us self conscious of the second, evaluative, level of Humean cognition. The process of producing the work of art

becomes the process by which the artists become aware of what they feel about the artwork's subject matter. So a portrait, for example, is not just a straight likeness of the sitter. That would be a mere fact. The portrait is the making tangible of the emotional experience of being in the presence of that sitter (Collingwood,<sup>10</sup> pp 44–5). The production of a mere likeness would be a craft, teachable in terms of certain formulae and techniques.

The production of an artwork therefore needs a sensitivity and creativity that goes beyond any pre-established set of rules. For present purposes, the crucial step that Collingwood makes in his argument is the Hegelian one. Collingwood holds that artists work not to articulate their personal feelings, but rather feelings that are representative of their community (Collingwood,<sup>10</sup> pp 300–24). Thus, the artist is the voice of the community, and the role of the artist is to articulate a sense of communal identity.

The clue to understanding the role of the humanities lies in the argument that the work of art makes explicit our otherwise taken for granted self understanding. Bringing that self understanding into consciousness allows us to reflect on it. We thus use reason to reflect on and check actions that might otherwise be motivated solely by blind emotion. In effect, Collingwood argues that the arts respond to something like the question that is regarded as central to the humanities: What is it to be human? Art makes explicit what people like us feel about this sort of thing. That indication only makes sense—or at least only makes sense as some kind of critical inquiry—if it presupposes some notion of what it is to be human. This is to say that “people like us” refers to a certain way of living as human beings. It is a practical exploration of what it is, or can be, to be human. Art makes explicit at least something of what that exploration entails.

Collingwood's arguments allow us to explore a possible explanation of the importance of the humanities: basically, we return to our core idea, and argue that the humanities are part of this articulation of what it is to be human. The humanities contribute to a critical awareness of what people like us are really like, and thus to an awareness of our current exploration of humanity.

There is an immediate problem with this suggestion. If art performs the role of social articulation and expression that Collingwood attributes to it, then why should the humanities, as a second order analytic activity, be necessary? Although we may need art, music, and literature, we do not obviously need art theory, musicology, and English literature. Like birds who do not need ornithology to know how to fly, perhaps we do not need humanities scholarship to engage in artistic endeavour and expression in order to learn to appreciate what it is to be human like us. The medical humanities might then be quite simply replaced by an art of medicine. Goya's self portrait with Dr Arrieta or Munch's images of sick and dying children seemingly express far more than any academic paper.

To respond to this, it may suffice to recognise a problem in Collingwood's own arguments. Collingwood defends certain artists as representatives of their age. T S Eliot is an example of such an artist (Collingwood,<sup>10</sup> pp 333–5). In *The Waste Land*, Collingwood finds explicated the emotional identity of the UK in the 1920s and 1930s. The problem that any such example poses is of how to validate this claim.

On the one hand, there may be a certain circularity. Those who experience in Eliot the emotions of their time and place are bound into a community by this same shared experience. This merely replaces the emotivism of instrumental reason with relativism. Different communities will find themselves reflected in different artworks, and the critical potential that Collingwood anticipated in this self consciousness is lost. We

like Eliot, but you like Rupert Brooke. Worse still, art has a rhetorical or propagandistic power that may entail that it does not reflect a community, that it does not articulate pre-existing albeit inchoate emotions, but rather creates the community and its emotions. We are coerced into seeing the world through Eliot's (or conversely Brooke's) eyes.

The problem, put otherwise, is that art articulates what it is to be people like us; however, it leaves us indifferent or even prejudiced to “people like them”. At best, we are left with cultural relativism. At worst, we become the victims of some form of ideological manipulation. Yet, Collingwood wants more than this. He writes passionately of the dangers of what he calls “corrupt consciousness” (Collingwood,<sup>10</sup> p 217). This is the distorted perception of who and what we are. We might suggest that the importance of the humanities lies precisely in its capacity to respond to this problem.

Collingwood is concerned with the arts. Yet, as noted above, the arts are but one of the activities with which the humanities are concerned. It may then be suggested that Collingwood's basic argument can be extended to encompass more of those activities. If history is treated as a form of story telling, then it may be possible to argue that it, too, performs like art. A historical narrative is written from, and also expresses, the perspective of a particular community. The history of Great Britain written by an English historian will differ from that written by a Welsh historian, let alone an African or Chinese historian. (Similarly, we might consider the contrast between medical history written from the doctor's perspective and that from the nurse's, the patient's, or even the manager's perspectives.) The historical narrative becomes a way of seeing the world, just like Eliot's poetry. The problems of relativism and propaganda, however, remain. A good history would now seem to be one that gives people like us pleasure and affirms our perception of ourselves and of our world.

This begins to suggest a structured relationship between the humanities and other activities, of which the arts are the paradigm. Following Collingwood, the arts offer ways of seeing the world that express communal experience and values. The problems of relativism and propaganda suggest the need for some second order critical activity, which is precisely where the humanities enter. By taking the example of religious belief to replace the arts, we can pursue this argument further. A religious text may be seen to perform the function of an artwork. It binds a community by offering a similar perspective on the world. Taking the Hebrew scriptures as an example, we might think here of the stories in Genesis, Exodus, or Job, and thereby would have something akin to the narratives of literature or history.

The Wisdom literature (Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the other books in the Old Testament of the Christian Bible, which are not primarily constituted by history, narrative, or law) may seem to pose a problem here, in that it lacks a narrative (or even particularly poetic) form. In response to this, we note that the Wisdom literature might presuppose that its readers are aware of the narrative elements of the scriptures. Similarly, a reader of the Koran will complement his or her readings with stories of the life of the Prophet. The similar, if more secular, writings of Kongzi (commonly called Confucius, the Chinese philosopher who lived from 551 to 479 BCE) take for granted the largely mythical stories and histories of earlier good and bad rulers. Such stories again function like artworks. They present the world from a certain perspective, and this perspective colours the non-narrative expressions of the Wisdom literature, the Koran, and Kongzi. Yet, our crucial point here is that Wisdom style sayings, quite independently of any complementary narratives, have a similar, world creating function.

Let us consider a couple of (randomly chosen) examples. Proverbs 11:1–3 reads:

A false balance is abomination to the LORD: but a just weight is his delight. When pride cometh, then cometh shame: but with the lowly is wisdom. The integrity of the upright shall guide them: but the perverseness of transgressors shall destroy them.

In *The Analytics*, part 13, the following conversation is recorded (in James Legge's translation):

Tsze-lu asked about government. The Master said, "Go before the people with your example, and be laborious in their affairs".

He requested further instruction, and was answered, "Be not weary in these things".

Chung-kung, being chief minister to the head of the Chi family, asked about government. The Master said, "Employ first the services of your various officers, pardon small faults, and raise to office men of virtue and talents".

Even in *The Analytics*, where there is a record of some sort of conversation and debate, the justification of these moral and political insights is minimal. They function rather as an entreaty to see the world this way—and if the world is seen this way, and so acted on, it will be a better world, a world that people like us wish to live in.

Allow us one more example, now following the implicit line from scripture (Wisdom literature) through moral philosophy (Kongzi) to epistemology and metaphysics. Pre-Socratic philosophers, such as Thales, Anaximander, Xenophanes, and Heraclitus, are typically known for short, epigrammatic insights. Hence: "We step and do not step into the same rivers, we are and we are not"; "Immortals are mortals, mortals immortals: living their death, dying their life"; and "The thunderbolt steers all things" (all from Heraclitus).<sup>11</sup> This epigrammatic style may in part be due to the way in which the Pre-Socratics' thoughts have been preserved, rather than the way in which they were originally expressed. They still function for the modern reader, however, and, crucially, also for Plato and Aristotle, who responded to these thoughts, as exhortations to "see the world this way". The argument is minimal. They are functioning as artworks. If you can see the world this way, then you join the community of people like us.

The argument that we are making is one that we hope will both justify the place of the humanities and defend the division between literature and philosophy that philosophers like Rorty seek to remove.<sup>12</sup> If the humanities are just one more form of literature, then they are as subject to the Collingwood problems of relativism and propaganda as are any of the arts. In contrast with this, we want to suggest that it is precisely the role of the humanities to sustain the critical, universal, and rational attitude and values that art (and indeed religious belief) might undermine. In Collingwood's terms, it is the role of the humanities to guard against corrupt consciousness.

It is worth pausing briefly here to consider the relationship between the arts and medicine, and thus return to the problems raised in the introduction. Public understanding of the nature of medicine, medical ethics, and hospital administration may be enhanced, or at least heightened, by watching television medical dramas. Similarly, that understanding will be heightened through reading newspaper reports (further examples of story telling). Yet it is precisely the degree to which dramas and news reports misrepresent or oversimplify the reality of the case, and, more particularly, the more they distort or hinder the articulation of the communal values that may inform ethical decision making in medicine, that they corrupt the audience's consciousness.

Something—the medical humanities—is thus required to check this corruption.

How the humanities should work, in the light of these arguments, may be clarified by returning to our philosophical examples and considering the difference between Heraclitus and other early pre-Socratics on the one hand and Plato and Aristotle on the other. The pre-Socratics offer what is, in effect, literature. They offer a possible way of seeing the world. The literature/philosophy division has not yet been made. Plato, however, for all his literary style and dramatic ability, has made that division, for the simple reason that these ways of seeing the world are subject to critical and rational scrutiny in his writings. Plato does not simply exhort us to see the world in this way; rather, he presents arguments and evidence for why we ought to see it in this way. This is taken further in Aristotle: not least because Aristotle is concerned with the nature of argument and reasoning itself, separate from the particular substance of any given argument. Here, we suggest, is the crucial contribution of the humanities. The humanities are sciences in the German sense of disciplines (*Wissenschaften*). The discipline is driven, in large part, by the need to justify our insights through consistent argument and the appeal to relevant evidence.

It may then be suggested that the difference between literature (and thus Collingwood's art) and the humanities lies precisely in the role that reason plays in the humanities. Theology does not just add aesthetic images to the scriptures it discusses. Rather, it tests them for their logical consistency and provides evidence. The importance of the revival of Aristotelian thought in Islam lay in no small part in the rational scrutiny that the Islamic philosophers then gave to the Koran, so that faith could be grounded by reason.<sup>13</sup> What counts as a good reason, and what counts as evidence, will vary according to context. None the less, the difference between Ellis Peters and the *Oxford History of England* lies in the fact that the account of the English 12th century given in the *Oxford History of England* is more readily supported by documentary and archaeological evidence however aesthetically pleasing the world of Brother Cadfael may be.

Art and story telling, religion, and speculative thought can be expressive, free and visionary, and may indeed create communities through people finding themselves reflected in its images or ways of seeing the world. In contrast, the humanities are disciplined *Wissenschaften* and perform the role of checking the propagandistic, conversionist potential of the arts. The humanities can say that this particular vision, however pleasing or exciting it may be, is epistemologically, morally, or politically wrong, and provide arguments and evidence for that claim.

Disciplined, complex, dispassionate rational analysis and reflection may make humanities disciplines opaque to lay readers. They may even appear to be pretentious and exclusive. Sometimes, indeed, they may be floridly pretentious and wilfully obscure. They may serve also to assist in the assassination of the passion that is part of the valued naive engagement with the arts, religion, and other expressions of humanity. None the less, in the majority of cases, opacity and dispassion are no more than necessary, if unfortunate, byproducts of subjecting expression and imagination to exact disciplined scrutiny.

## CONCLUSION

John Dewey remarks that "nobody would deny that there has been a German, a French, an English philosophy in a sense in which there have not been national chemistries or astrophysics".<sup>14</sup> If so, the humanities still speak to specific communities, unlike the natural sciences that at least aspire to speak to a universal humanity. Although the disciplinary nature of the humanities may entail a similar universal

aspiration, not least in its treatment within pure logic, there still seems to be something relativistic about the humanities. They still appear to speak in the voices of particular communities, and about issues that concern particular communities.

This may not be a problem. At one level, the humanities simply allow a community to scrutinise its own values and meanings, whereas the arts and other activities on which they depend, merely make those values and meanings explicit and attractive. The humanities thus retain a vital critical role. Good theologians or philosophers are, no doubt, capable of pursuing their inquiry through the creation of expressive images, as is a divine or a novelist. They may thus encourage us to see the world “this way”. None the less, the humanities scholar is a rationally disciplined critic. He or she must not simply encourage us to see the world this way, but must explain why it is right for us to see it this way. It is then—for example—not sufficient to just tell the history of medicine from the nurse’s perspective. The historian also explains why the inclusion of the nurse’s voice is wrong.

At a second level, it is the role of humanities scholars to speak not merely to their own community but also to other communities and their members—“people like you”. Although the humanities may begin with the concerns, preoccupations, and modes of expression of a particular community, they open up the possibility of disciplined dialogue with other communities.

We do not have to be German to read German philosophy. More particularly, German philosophy opens up the broad metaphysical, ethical, and epistemological concerns that characterise German culture to a non-German audience, just as German musicology (which is to say, musicology conducted within German culture and by Germans, rather than musicology necessarily about German music) may open up the German understanding of music to others. Crucially, a reading of the humanities, such as a Briton reading a German philosopher or musicologist, demands a reasoned response. We must bring our own philosophy or musicology into a discussion with the other, assessing the rational rigour of the argument and weighing evidence. The arts, in contrast, invite us only to like them—to enjoy seeing the world that way, but not to ask whether it is right for us to see the world that way, or what it would mean to us to see the world that way. Thus, to follow the previous example, doctors, on reading the nurse’s history, do not simply begin to see the world from another’s (the nurse’s) perspective. They have their original perspective challenged. They are invited into a rational, and evidenced, argument about how to see the world (and in consequence, how to act in it).

This begins to open up, once more, the question of the relationship between the humanities and the sciences, including medicine. Briefly addressing this question leads us back to the problems raised in the introduction.

Dewey seems to suggest a fundamental break between the humanities and the natural sciences. Yet, the sciences are not conducted in a cultural vacuum. This entails, on the one hand, that the history of a science is a valid activity of the humanities. Science, although it aspires to results that have a universal validity and tests its theories against a reality that exists independently of the human observer, is shaped by the pragmatic needs and political and moral concerns of particular communities. On the other hand, and perhaps more importantly, science will have an impact on cultures. The fundamental results of scientific research are often akin to the exhortations of Heraclitus and Kongzi. They are invitations to see the world differently. The Copernican revolution, Newtonian physics, Hooke’s physiology, Darwin, Einstein, and now genetics all open up original perspectives on the physical and human world. As such, they challenge

what people like us think and what we do. They pose anew the question of what it is to be human, and as such offer new ways of living out the practical exploration of being human. Although the sciences pose these challenges and offer these potentials, they cannot provide answers.

Answers, or at least guidance on how to proceed, can come only through a combination of the arts (in the broad sense suggested above, and including art, religion, secular speculation, and historical narratives) and the critical disciplines of the humanities. Only when arts and humanities come together can passionate reactions to the failings of the Welsh National Health Service be turned into articulate and critical reflections—allowing us to say why the problems of people with eating disorders do matter, and should matter, to people like us. Similarly, only when arts and humanities come together can passionate reactions to new genetic technology be turned into articulate and critical reflection on what genetics means for people like us, and how we wish to develop, exploit, or even prohibit the fruits of that knowledge.

People do not face problems in a cultural vacuum any more than they pursue science in such a vacuum. The problems of eating disorders make sense only against the background of cultural assumptions about what it is to be human, and what it ought to be to be human. Similarly, the possibilities opened up by new technology and scientific discoveries should not be emotively rejected (through the “yuk” factor) or passionately embraced (through a blind enthusiasm for novelty), but rather reflected on in the light of the basic question: “What is it to be human?” Only then can the emotivism inherent in instrumentalism be checked, for only then can the question of what is intrinsically valuable (albeit intrinsically valuable to people like us) be posed. This allows the problem of the ends to which means are to be deployed to be opened up to imaginative, critical, and disciplined argumentation among people like us—and, as significantly in the context of ostensibly universal healthcare provision in a pluriform nation, people like you.

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