The Role of the Humanities at the Threshold of the twenty-first Century

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By now it has become a commonplace that there is hardly any branch of knowledge or applied knowledge which does not make use of information technology. It is becoming ever more self-evident that doctors, lawyers, architects, archaeologists, pilots, cashiers, lotto receivers, surveyors, secretaries, and a host of other people must be computer literate if they are to survive. Moreover, it is also evident that the advances made in the general sciences are simply staggering. The traditional sciences together with computer science seem to be a sine qua non both in the classroom and in daily life. The world needs science in order to survive and advance. There is therefore a whole body of scientific knowledge which simply has to be discovered and grasped. In this respect, governments and universities have a crucial role to play in seeing that sufficient investment is made for the research and teaching of the so-called hard sciences (as well as computer science) for the betterment of humanity at large.

However, humanity cannot survive on science alone. We are already running the risk of being virtual in many sectors of life rather than real, and to be real we have to be ever more fully human. And to be ever more fully human we need to drink from the living spring of human culture at large. This obviously also includes the sciences, but not the sciences divorced from man and his general culture, thoughts and feelings. In a certain sense it is a pity that the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1813-1911) had divided human knowledge into two blocks: the Naturwissenschaften (what we would call the hard sciences) and the Geisteswissenschaften (what we would call the human sciences), because in reality man is one and undivided: man the scientist and man the humanist.

Traditionally, universities have generally realized that they cannot deal only with the sciences. Somehow or other, universities have generally succeeded to uphold the humanities, those areas of study which deal with human culture and which involve creative skills. Hence, there have been subjects like history, art, literature, languages, classics, oriental studies and so on and so forth. Such areas and their offshoots bring the student and the scholar into direct contact with the culture of their ancestors and help them become more aware of the stream of history of which they form a part.

The humanities make us more aware of the fact that we are guardians of our cultural heritage. They help us to appreciate it better and to safeguard it more closely: for indeed we do realize that we ourselves appreciate our own lives better once we put them in a general historical context of universal human history. To study things like archaeology, literature, philosophy, history, languages, classics and near eastern studies seems to be so far removed from real life. Why do we engage at all in such subjects? Is not this a waste of time?
The answer to the foregoing question depends on our vision of education. If one is simply interested to go to university in order to be ready-made for a job at hand, then most of the subjects studied in the humanities are a waste of time. However, if one believes that the ultimate aim of university education is to turn out better human beings with an appreciation of genuine human values, then one will have to admit that we need in fact to place the humanities on an even stronger footing. Indeed, in this context one can say that the humanities constitute in fact the soul of a university. For in dealing with the humanities, a student is brought more directly into contact with what every other student at university should be experiencing, albeit often indirectly. When studying things like history, philosophy, ancient languages, art, and literature, for example, a student is inevitably making an overall unique human experience. It is like being on retreat from daily life for a period of three to four years during which a student can start to better understand what understanding is all about. S/he will also be trained to realize how hard it is to make a correct judgment and that often there is more than one solution to a given question or problem. Moreover, the humanities help train our students how to listen better to other human beings. When a student is grappling with some arcane text from antiquity, for example, s/he is also being trained to listen attentively to other human voices.

Indeed, the humanities do not (and should not) provide direct training for a profession. One of the hallmarks of humanistic studies is precisely that they are not concerned with that which is immediate: they stand at a remove from the here and now. And this is done so that in the process the student will be able to glean more fruit from a deep intellectual experience which will in the end make her/him a better person. So, for example, such a student would prefer to study English literature rather than business English; the latter is immediate and very useful indeed, but the former is richer and will in the end produce a person with more depth who would eventually tackle even business English itself in a better manner.

Thus, it becomes apparent that the training offered in the humanities is useful but not utilitarian. After having been trained in the humanities (be it history, archaeology, ancient or modern languages and literature) one is (if one has benefited from all the training offered) a better person for it. One appreciates better man's cultural heritage, one has learnt how to work hard under pressure without losing one's sanity, one has learnt how to appreciate truth for its own sake, and one has also learnt how to appreciate points of view other than one's own. Such a person is not tailor-made for the labour market; but given the appropriate training in the skills of many areas found in this market (such as centres of cultural tourism, museums, certain businesses and management organizations, and a host of other fields both in the private and the public sector), a graduate in the humanities will in the end be of a better service to society than one who has not done humanistic studies. Such a student has spent three to four years seeking truth in a given area for its own sake. S/he has not been spurred on by the quest for money, honour, or such like things; no, what spurred her/him on was ultimately the joy of learning and the love of truth. Now, learning and truth are not divorced from life; indeed, if we think
hard about it we realize that our society is often in a mess precisely because truth and honesty do not matter. A society which is sometimes characterized by cheating, corruption, and sloppiness in work is certainly not ideal. The training which the humanities offers is precisely diametrically opposed to such a situation. Indeed, the more people have been trained in the humanities, the more will values like truth, decency, precision, balanced judgment, honesty, and respect for the opinion of others matter.

Would not society at large be better served if more people like the ones just described happen to fill up the key posts of our labour market? Would not everyone benefit if somebody who might have once spent hours on end to try and crack an ancient Semitic text, or to grapple with some abstract philosophical thought on being and essence, or to try and decide where the exact interface between two archaeological layers lies, were to carry with her/him this habit of relentlessly seeking and loving the truth into daily life, indeed right into the labour market? Would not society be better off with more people who have acquired a habit of observation, of a selfless quest for and love of the truth, of dedication to work, of precision, of being aware of one's cognitional activities, of closely listening to others, as well as of appreciating a nation's global cultural heritage?

The foregoing points are only a sample of the multiple benefits which accrue to society from people trained in the humanities. The end result of a humanistic training is better persons which also means better families and ultimately a better society. This means that the humanities are very useful indeed; but they can never be utilitarian - that would signal their death. A student who has studied a humanistic subject, such as English literature, will probably forget the plots of most of the novels he has had to study; but the shadow of learning - those habits and attitudes described in the foregoing paragraph, especially the quest of truth for its own sake - will accompany her/him to the grave. And owing to such a shadow, we are all better off. The humanities still have a crucial role to play in the twenty-first century, and our university is still very much aware of it.

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