WAYS FORWARD IN THE HUMANITIES

Peter Jones

The Humanities are moribund and we cannot identify, let alone pursue, ways forward in the Humanities until we confront what I shall here call "the four tyrannies": the tyrannies of ignorance, of habits, of time and of the self. To address the tyranny of *ignorance*, we must resolve the challenges of scepticism: for ignorance can function as a shield and excuse, as well as a threat to our deepest desires. To confront the tyranny of *habits*, habits of mind as well as of behaviour, we must recognise the domain of dogma – the application of yesterday's answers to tomorrow's problems. The tyranny of *time* forces us to consider the relentless implications of change; for although the traditions of the past alone make the present intelligible, we cannot justify our future actions only in terms of a vanished context. To fight the tyranny of *self*, we must identify the myriad factors in life which engender and endorse egoism; these include, let me alert you, some central practices within education itself.

Everything changes, and change weakens our grasp on things. Which is why we are creatures of habit. So how do we gain anchorage in the shifting sands of time? Various arrangements, from families to nation-states, have evolved which give us stability in the face of change, although all of them initially require the individual to subordinate his will to that of others. But alone we are powerless to achieve our wants, yet in the face of group inertia or the uncontrollable impetus of its mindless gyrations, we remain impotent and our anxiety yields to despair. Normally only philosophers luxuriate in the vertigo of such dilemmas, but all of us become aware of them from time to time, and a healthy and vibrant community will ensure that its citizens are appropriately forearmed against them. The best defense is the same now as it

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has been throughout history, although its precise nature necessarily changes: education.

Unfortunately, all institutions, of course, and the professions associated with them, tend towards paralysis, inaction, conservatism, hostility to criticism, and the generation of jargon which acts as a bond between initiates and an intended mystery to outsiders. The unredeemed become resentful, and the accused petulant. Institutions foster habit addiction; and for addicts serious measures are called for.

These remarks apply, I repeat, to all institutions – the churches, universities, government administrations, the medical and legal professions. You would expect a philosopher, would you not, to take a high and mighty line, albeit a simple one – namely this: BAD PRACTICE RESULTS FROM BAD THINKING.

We undertake enquiry in order to conduct our lives more effectively, but from the outset two notions must be emphasised, for these are clues to ways forward in the Humanities: *complexity* and *context*. Most issues are extremely complex, calling not only for extensive analysis of the actors involved, but also for delicate judgement on appropriate action. In addition, all events occur within contexts, which can be understood as the matrix of beliefs, attitudes and judgements we impose on whatever we investigate. In brief, our own interpretation of meaning and value determines what the context is. If we recognise these two points we can see why one endeavour remains central to the nation's vitality and very existence: education.

It is well known that in the Western World we are all heirs to two distinct traditions of the humanities, one deriving from Cicero, the other from writers such as Petrarch and Leonardo Bruni. These Renaissance scholars devised a primarily literary curriculum (*studia humanitatis*) which excluded logic, mathematics, natural sciences and metaphysics from their concerns. Their educational programme was centred on a notion of a unique, autonomous self, which would be shaped by a study of the language and literature of ancient Greece and Rome. The inner life, in their view, is all, and for the perfection of the inner man study of the natural world was held to be morally useless. Petrarch, for example, was quite unable to embrace the Roman conception of the unbreakable bonds between an individual and society, or the view that as an agent, man had to be judged by deeds, not intentions. The departure from Cicero could hardly be more complete, for he had held that a whole man must embrace all areas of learning, in order to fulfil his many roles in the complex universe of which he is a part.

Of course, no single factor is responsible for the intellectual challenges we face today, but two of them are traceable to the sharp distinction between the arts and the sciences in seventeenth century France, and the institutional consequences that followed. The crucial events, largely political in nature, can be quickly summarised. Colbert, like Richelieu and Mazarin, was keen to establish, or consolidate France's intellectual pre-eminence over its rivals, parallel to its economic, military and political strength and ambitions. Obvious models lay in the sixteenth century Academies of the Italian city-states, but the immediate practical questions centred on what was to be taught, how and why. It was argued that in fields of enquiry where measurement was crucial, the modern world was demonstrably superior to the ancients, and conventions could be devised as a basis for teaching and learning. In areas where the ancient world excelled and had not been bettered, success seemed to depend on individual talent, and systematic teaching, even if devised, could not guarantee progress. Using existing terminology, but with unforeseen consequences, they defined the mathematically irradiated enquiries as 'les sciences' [from *scientia*]; here, skills could be imparted and progress charted. The remainder of human enquiry – and notice this marginalisation at the outset – depended on individual talent, and was designated 'les arts' [although this term had specifically meant, until then, teachable skill].

Of course, the ancients had themselves occasionally implied that the makers of certain things (artists, as we would say) were not mere craftsmen, and the seventeenth century embellishment of this idea was harnessed to other social and political developments, only one of which is there time to mention here: the gradual creation of a 'public' for the arts, that group of people who were neither patrons nor practitioners. And these spectators, ignorant of the processes, could only concentrate on the effects of what they encountered; in the days of John Locke and others, in the early eighteenth century, that meant attention to personal feelings. The arts, it is true, were credited with imagination, genius, talent – all pious assertions of the indefinable – but they were also linked with decoration, pleasure and idleness; something to be enjoyed in moments of relaxation from pursuit of knowledge, or even from the conduct of life. It scarcely needs to be added that almost nobody considered the endeavours of non-European cultures, and we all know the dismal consequences. In eighteenth-century Scotland, at least, civic leaders worked hard with Universities to retain the insights of the ancient and modern world in tandem; all students combined studies of the arts and sciences, with the overall goal of the 'improvement' of society itself. Unfortunately, the intellectual and social division of labour which thinkers such as David Hume and Adam Smith described and predicted, led to institutional specialisation

and mutual incomprehension. By the middle of the nineteenth century, British attitudes had polarized almost completely between the arts and sciences, and the Humanities unwittingly surrendered any right to be taken seriously. It is against this background, in Britain at least, that ways forward must be identified.

For largely social reasons, and until the last decade, the liberal arts or humanities have enjoyed a century or more of protection from effective intellectual challenge and, like comfortably protected clergy before them, have ignored the duties of self-criticism and accountability. All practices evolve against a background of inherited traditions, and in response to perceived needs. Central concepts used in their defence may be difficult to analyse and explain, but the effort must be made; moreover, it must be made with respect to, and with respect for, the genuine bewilderment of questioners. The Humanities today are moribund, and their representatives for too long have devoted their lives to the conservation of energy, the harnessing of inertia and the assiduous nurture of their incapacities.

Let us define the Humanities as being responsible for interpreting the meanings and values of the past, present and future. The range of their enquiries cannot therefore be limited in any way. Social historians who remain ignorant, for example, of scientific ideas, practices and techniques, will be as distorted in their judgement as art-historians who know nothing about making paintings or sculptures. But precisely because the range of issues over which thought must range is so wide, it ought to be more of a co-operative endeavour. The so-called Renaissance man must be replaced by the modern analogue of a team or group of investigators who individually contribute different expertise and perspectives. In many areas associated with the humanities in the past, solo work and judgement is no longer of first priority; and institutions which fail to recognise this fact are doomed.

When it is argued that certain skills are pre-eminently acquired by studying the humanities we do well to check the evidence. It may be only a matter of degree, if that, in which a study of literature develops the imagination better than a study of astronomy; there may be little significant difference in capacity to collect, analyse and interpret evidence between an historian and a palaeontologist; skill in ordered, coherent thinking may be acquired in mathematics as much as in philosophy. Most certainly it matters that citizens can communicate effectively, and for this training in analysis and presentation are crucial. It is also essential that citizens have the imaginative capacity to envisage possibilities, and to reflect flexibly in the light of changed and changing circumstances. A study of the past, and of other cultures, of literature

and the arts, are fruitful ways to enable people to enlarge their minds, and to think beyond the present and themselves. And the biographical reports of such experiences should not be ignored. Nevertheless, there seems to be nothing necessary about the outcome of such studies, and very little that could not come by other educational means.

Let me refer once again to Cicero, because his notion of the Humanities involved three features that were progressively downgraded, except for a brief period in eighteenth century Scotland: *scepticism*, *moderation* and *rhetoric*. Each requires brief comment, especially because scepticism and rhetoric allow us to comment on the *tyrannies of ignorance and of self*. As a method, scepticism simply involves proportioning claims to the evidence available. Logically, of course, there is no end to questioning; but psychologically and socially there will be.

Throughout history many people have felt uneasy or even threatened by *scepticism*, that is, the view that no certain knowledge of how things are can be found. Such doubt, it was felt, inhibits action of any kind and undermines the very fabric of thought and society. Of course, however unlikely it may seem, any particular factual claim could be mistaken. Indeed, a claim is a factual claim only if it could be mistaken: if you couldn't be wrong, you cannot be right. We must remember, however, that we all learn how and when to doubt, and that doubting can itself be justified or unjustified. Not everything can be doubted at once; whenever we express doubts about some things, other things remain stable within our assumptions. The tyranny of ignorance must be resisted by accepting that although we could on any occasion be mistaken, we could not on *all* occasions be mistaken about everything; that although there are always other perspectives to be considered, what we have may have to suffice.

The ancient advice to follow 'moderation in all things' is not an empty saw, but a necessary condition of personal sanity, social cohesion and political stability: only moderate scepticism is justifiable. There are certainly difficulties in how best to characterise *moderation*; because moderation is always relative to boundaries and to context, the burden of judgement is always upon us. The practical problem is that we cannot set out to be moderate unless we know how far to go.

To secure a hearing and to elicit a sympathetic response, to harmonise conflicting elements and ensure judicious decisions, to enlist the co-operation of others, moderation was taken as a profoundly important social device. There were problems, however, and they confront us still. Today, as ever before, hysterical fanatics terrorise their fellow beings in the name of one or

other exclusive dogma, god or myth. Hungry souls, it seems, always settle for a mere pot of message. Moderation in thought does not entail compromise in action, however, nor does it involve seeking peace at any price. But how can moderates secure power from, or resist the attacks of, fanatical opponents? Can moderates gain, maintain and defend an effective power base without sacrificing the integrity or consistency of their views? Can moderation, indeed, be more than a luxury and a mask, enjoyed by those who hold power by other means?

And here a third objection emerges. We must learn when how and why to be moderate, just as we must learn when, how and why to doubt. But our moderation, like our scepticism, defines the style of our lives – the content as well as the form. Moreover *moderation* is a crucial tool in combating the tyranny of HABIT – because *moderation* in all things calls for continual reflection, on every single different case, and cannot itself become a habit.

The remedy for too much scepticism is the anchorage of reflection in everyday life and action, and the third Ciceronian notion that suffered debasement over the centuries was equally central to daily life: *rhetoric*. Although rhetoric embraced the arts of communication, Cicero emphasised that this called for thought about the medium, the message and the context – in brief, *attention to others rather than to oneself.* Communication faces the tribunal of judgement in public. Rhetoric, for Cicero, was at the heart of education; only someone versed in the history and politics of the community, in the interests and aspirations of his hearers, of their own prejudices, habits and psychology, could be a true citizen of the state, able to communicate effectively, persuasively and responsibly. Nothing could be achieved without effective communication, and nothing worthy without sceptical, moderate judgement – sceptical, because the available evidence is usually inadequate, and moderate because excess leads to a loss of control.

But, I hear you say, we cannot survive without some measure of innovation. Innovation can be recognised, of course, only by reference to an existing practice or tradition; and context alone enables one to decide whether the claim to innovation is favourable or unfavourable. Oriental cultures, for example, seem to have sustained unchanging patterns of activity over many millennia – but we should be extremely careful to avoid branding their peoples as craftsmen but not artists.

In Western thought the roles of tradition were explicitly acknowledged by the ancient rhetoricians who rightly held that effective and intelligible communication called for consideration of the audience – their knowledge, capacities, expectations. Moreover, they realised that the inescapable

anchorage of traditions, in matters of medium, style and even content, entailed that understanding was impossible without the supposition and delineation of a context.

But if these conditions are necessary for understanding, how do they square with familiar yearnings by artists for the new, the original, the revolutionary? Three points, at least, can be made immediately. First: artists are not ignorant of what other artists are doing and have done: even when they know little about the past, they are intensely interested in their contemporaries and rivals. What they do, to be intelligible to themselves, occurs within an already existing matrix of practices and possibilities – historians readily see this in retrospect, when previously shocking artists are seen to be barely supplementing established trends.

The second point is this: whilst it is typically true that artists cannot in advance say precisely where they are going, they can recognise and reject false trails; and the exercise of critical judgement throughout the making of their work is essential, and central to final acceptance, notwithstanding the contribution of accidents and the unforeseen. Third: puzzles about how understanding of an artist's apparent innovation is possible, parallel puzzles about how understanding of language is possible. We all know that linguistic competence is revealed in the capacity to understand countless utterances that we have never heard before, and may never hear again; the acquisition of initial skills and rules, underwritten, some say, by innate capacities, ensure that we very quickly learn how to make and respond to previously unmet utterances. I am certain, myself, that only when philosophical reflection on the arts is securely located within work of this kind, alongside analysis of social action, that we shall escape the dismal mumbo-jumbo bequeathed to us by aesthetic propagandists – and art critics.

To confront the tyranny of *time* we must acknowledge that all human practices, and the concepts used to characterise them, have histories. The generic concepts of the arts and sciences have histories which, even in the last decades, have undergone considerable change, as additional perspectives have been added to the discussions. It should not be thought, however, that the talkers should be silenced in order to allow the practitioners to get on with their tasks. Fruitful discourse about the arts, at least, requires the contribution of practitioners and non-practitioners alike, and the roles each play in society are modified by the outcomes of such discourse; the nature of that discourse, however, should always be submitted to the most critical and sceptical scrutiny, for otherwise we shall be unable to separate the categories that are imposed from the resemblances that are found.

Practising scientists often complain that the accounts given by historians and philosophers of science bear little relation to the science they themselves do; and artists say the same. We should ponder this dislocation: the traditions suggested by observers for locating the co-ordinates of a work, often differ from those acknowledged by the artists themselves. Historians, after all, select, omit, re-order, invent and embellish, in order to tell a narrative which secures and holds a reader's attention; to identify a tradition, or commend innovation is to engage in interpretation, and historians, as Hume emphasised, are simultaneously blessed with knowledge of outcomes, but ignorance of original intentions. This point is part of a larger philosophical view that not all the characteristics of processes can be detected in their traces.

I must now say something briefly about the tyranny of *self*, of the pernicious effects of egoism, so tragically underwritten by certain trends in education. Let me alert you to the dangers of DOOTING: this is not a Scots, or even a Canadian, representation of doubt but an anagram for "doing one's own thing". I shall show you how dooters doot and anti-dooters don't.

Fundamentally we must grasp that we are all social beings who learn the nature of social behaviour, with its attendant duties and rights, from other people: the emphasis here is on *others* as the source of our views and on *learning* as the means to acquire them. The opportunities for self-assertion and even self-awareness are initially limited. Learning is at the centre of our socialisation and of our humanisation. A small example must suffice: illiteracy. In an extended sense illiteracy involves deviant or anti-social behaviour, because all who remain illiterate are deprived of command over those thoughts and responsibilities which require language for their expression.

I am well aware that different ethnic and social groups have different linguistic habits, traditions and conventions; but language is a mode of symbolism, and some modes are simply richer for certain purposes, and more extensible than others – it is grotesque to restrict peoples to their own traditions simply for the reason that they *are* the traditions, or for the reason that to offer them alternatives is to impose alien interests. In this context one must censure academics who are obscure in the hope of appearing profound, as much as students who confuse self-betrayal with self-expression. Verbal felicity may well presuppose verbal facility, but articulacy, precision and coherence are attainments learned only through rigorous discipline.

In addition to command over language, and thus of thought, I hold that good manners and courtesy are ingredients of genuine moral and social autonomy precisely because they involve consideration of and respect for others. Those who do their own thing often intrude on others, and in so doing

fail to grasp the nature of social inter-dependence. Although what counts as good-manners in a particular society is quite contingent, the intentional flouting of such manners represents a double mistake: a mistake about knowledge and a mistake about morality. Of course, no-one denies that one should dispense with snobbery and artificiality – which are sometimes mistaken for good-manners; but respect for others requires recognition of the social nature of man, and his most distinctive capacity, the capacity for complex communication, without which there could be no knowledge. The second point I want to make may strike you as rather odd: I refer to absence of wit, particularly among those who advocate doing their own thing. Many reasons have been given for denigrating wit and humour in general, especially by religious and political fanatics. The commonest reason is that serious matters ought not to be treated with levity – a claim that has many marks of circularity. The exclusive zeal implied in such a view, in my judgement, is misplaced and narrowing. For wit and humour bring before the mind alternative possibilities, and this power enables them to perform the inestimable function of self-protection. Moreover, in general, wit presupposes knowledge of the field in which it is exercised and a high degree of literacy in that field. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that where education is deemed to have no standards and no foundations, reading, writing and arithmetic are replaced by rudeness, rancour and riot.

I must return to my main remarks. It must be forcibly emphasised that a thorough training in the traditions of a discipline must precede justified and effective scrutiny of it, even if such training also serves to discourage such scrutiny. My point is this: unless one knows the vocabulary and methodology of a discipline, one will be able neither to circumscribe the target of one's criticism, nor determine its proper focus. I am not saying that one must, in some sense, 'accept' the tenets before one is qualified to challenge them – understanding something does not entail accepting it; if that were the case, establishing that a claim is false would require that one did not understand it. Rather, any discipline ought to instil two related, but fundamental, capacities: the capacity for self-criticism – because one cannot know how the future will call upon one to defend, modify or even abandon our procedures; and a rational flexibility, based upon a secure grasp of one's own grounds and standards. But, you may ask, are there any such standards? How are they articulated, preserved and taught? By whom, and under what conditions? The short answer – and there is time, unfortunately, for no more – is this: anything at all that can be taught logically must have standards, because standards simply are the rules or conventions which govern what is being taught. Depending on the task, the teacher may not be able to *say* what those standards

are, but he must know and be able to detect them; a musician can show the standards, for example, by performing a piece in a certain way. *Showing*, indeed, is at least as essential to teaching as saying, especially when standards are at issue. When Leonardo da Vinci said that he is a poor pupil who does not excel his teacher, part of what he meant was that every pupil ought to be able to excel his master in those skills that are strictly teachable. For surely what a teacher is doing, is enabling the pupil to go on; that is, to proceed appropriately in the light of what has been taught, but in the absence of the teacher; to go on by himself, but because he is a social being, to go on not alone, secure in the knowledge that the conventions he follows are publicly available and discernible. It was, after all, a goal of Ciceronian humanism to be never less alone than when wholly alone.

Two points need to be added here. Those strains in educational theory which stress self-expression above all else have been as disastrous in their effects as those which exclusively stressed sheer drilling. There can be ex-pression only if there is something to express, and techniques with which to do it. The second, related, point is this. Intelligibility is a function of one's present knowledge and ignorance. No teacher need condone the indolence of those with no motivation to learn, by yielding to demands for instant intelligibility. I accept, of course, that at some levels of education, a major task is to bring about such motivation, and here a necessary means may well be the harnessing of present interests. But effective University teaching presupposes motivation in the students, and their actual interests cannot conceivably be a limiting factor on what is taught – for how, on such a view, could present interests ever be subjected to scrutiny, let alone replacement?

Oscar Wilde tells us that the only exercise small minds get is jumping to conclusions; let me, therefore, walk sedately to my own. Those who teach try to develop each individual to the full, try to secure the effective exchange of ideas in an atmosphere of rational enquiry, try to increase sensitivity and breadth of understanding and decrease uniformity and mindless habit. Indolence and anti-intellectualism are their enemies; a liberal education teaches a passionate application of the mind, a means to sustain and enrich one's life by focusing and thereby prolonging one's energy. It may be embarrassing to remind ourselves of these old truths; if they are truths, they need to be regularly announced, critically examined in the light of changed ideas, modified where necessary, and proudly affirmed. I hope that the rigour with which we undertake these noble tasks can be infused with elegance, and courtesy and wit, for our standards are revealed in our style. That suggestion is not trivial. It is sadly easy for administrators and faculty to adopt what I call

a siege-mentality, in which the mildest enquiry is morosely resented, and genuine questions treated as subversive challenge.

If the Humanities, then, are concerned with the interpretation of meanings and values they cannot be, institutionally, confined in what they do, limited by departmental or disciplinary boundaries. Those from within the institutions must work very closely with those outside and in all domains of life. I have suggested that the Humanities can go forward only by transcending the boundaries by which they are *now* confined. Moderate scepticism must be harnessed to challenge our beliefs and practices, and thereby combat the tyrannies of ignorance and habit; awareness of the ever-changing context, together with a grasp of the historical sources of everything we do, will help us resist the tyrannies of habit and of time; constant attention to the challenges and responsibilities of communication, together with insistence that we learn from others more than we could possibly learn by ourselves, will help us combat the urges of self-absorption, self-promotion and self-esteem that I have called "the tyranny of the self".

Infectious enthusiasm, generosity of interpretation, healthy scepticism, moderation in judgement, and above all style – style as understood in the eighteenth century French saying that style defines the man (*le style c'est l'homme même*: Buffon). It is the absence of such values that many lament in contemporary society: scepticism is seen as subversive, moderation as unprincipled compromise and style as superfluous. In their place we find assertion, stridency and exaggeration. But the view that style defines a man embraces both a philosophical definition and a moral prescription. It means that the unique character of each of us can be detected in the harmonies and disharmonies we generate – our beliefs, as well as our behaviour, our posture as well as our possessions, and in practical life our omissions as well as our actions. It also embodies the moral tenet that individuals and society are better to the degree to which they strive for self-knowledge and harmony, recognising the complexities they confront. It is an intensely humanist and humanitarian view: it is also a view that requires us to keep our wits, and to exercise our wit.

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