

What Have the Humanities Ever Done For Us?

Ian Donaldson

The case for public funding of scientific and technological research in Australia, as in most countries in the world, is generally regarded as self-evident and axiomatic. Without sustained and curiosity-driven research, as everyone knows, bridges might well fall down, cheap fuels remain undiscovered, new viruses spread unchecked from country to country. Even quite unusual experiments within these technical and scientific fields whose larger purpose isn't immediately evident to the wider public are commonly viewed with patience, even celebrated with good humour. The work of a seven-man Australian team of physicists analysing 'the forces required to drag sheep over various surfaces' was recently awarded one of Harvard's coveted Ig Nobel Prizes, which are designed to reward achievements 'that first make people laugh, and then make them think'. In the humanities, however, novel and unfamiliar research projects have at times received a less-friendly welcome from the Australian media, while some notoriously in recent years have failed to gain final government funding approval, although endorsed by expert assessors nominated by the Australian Research Council. Part of the problem may be that the larger goals and benefits of the humanities are generally less well known, less explicitly defined, less forcefully canvassed, than those of the sciences.

What, many might ask, are the humanities actually for? What indeed — as a Pythonesque sceptic might cry — have the humanities ever done for us?

I want to look at three sorts of answers that might be offered in response to these basic questions. The first focuses on the large, although often unrecognised, contribution the humanities make to the national economy. The second turns on the role that the humanities can play in relation to the big and seemingly intractable problems of the day, and to the wider processes of creativity and discovery; to what is often nowadays known as ‘innovation’. The third suggests that the humanities might help us understand our place in the world, and what it could mean, in the 21st century, to be that difficult thing, a citizen.

Defining the humanities

And what are the humanities, exactly? Like the word ‘science’ — which in its original sense simply meant ‘knowledge’ (Latin, *scientia*) — the term *humanities* is extraordinarily broad in reference. It was used originally for learning or literature concerned in any way with human culture, embracing all the various branches of polite scholarship, including grammar, rhetoric, poetry, and in particular the study of ancient Latin and Greek classics. Originally, too, the word was often used in the singular, as it is still today in Scottish universities, where a notice announcing the Department of Humanity signifies the presence of classicists (rather than necessarily of kindly people, although they may of course be that as well). ‘Humanities’, like ‘science’, signals a field virtually without borders, as the Latin motto of the Australian Academy of the Humanities provocatively boasts: *humani nihil alienum*, ‘nothing human is alien to me’. Ironically, this famous tag is lifted from a comedy by the Roman dramatist Terence entitled *The Self-Tormentor*, in which a busybody named Chremes, who is always sticking his nose into other people’s affairs, attempts to justify himself when rebuked for his impertinence: ‘I am a man,’ he protests, ‘I hold that what affects another man affects me’: *homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto*. The

humanities stick their collective nose in a similar way into many different branches of learning: art, anthropology, archaeology, classical and modern literature, languages and linguistics, philosophy, musicology, history, religion, and much else besides. All of these disciplines have their own intricate subfields, methodologies, territorial disputes and tribal modes of behaviour, yet share a common and central concern with aspects of human culture. Some cross over more or less imperceptibly into the realm of the social sciences, an area of inquiry primarily concerned with the analysis of larger patterns of collective behaviour — political, sociological, economic, legal, philosophical, educational, and so on — and the formation of related theories, principles, and procedures. The boundaries between the humanities and social sciences are notoriously fluid, and many historians, philosophers and lawyers (for example) would rightly insist that their work belongs to both these territories. Despite their ancient origins, the humanities moreover are a living and organic formation, constantly evolving and shifting shape. Along with the more traditional areas of study come the so-called ‘new humanities’ that have emerged in recent years, such as media and film studies, cultural and communication studies, literary theory, gender studies, which nowadays occupy an increasingly prominent place within the university curriculum. In the broadest sweep of the term, the humanities also embrace the creative and performing arts: writing, photography, film, the graphic and plastic arts, theatre, dance, musicianship, involving practical and professional as well as scholarly skills.

Measuring value

Many of these activities give a direct and obvious stimulus to what are nowadays known as the creative industries: to the programs of museums and art galleries, of dance and operatic and theatrical groups, of symphony orchestras and publishing houses, of film production companies, of broadcasters and journalists, of cultural festivals, and of the associated new technologies on which such groups and enterprises nowadays depend. The ways in which the stimulus is transmitted are

curiously unpredictable, as Iain McCalman has shown in a persuasive and entertaining analysis of this question.¹ Who'd have dreamt that the scholarly ruminations of an Oxford professor, immersed in the world of Old Norse sagas, would result in the print and filmic triumphs of *The Lord of the Rings*, with their immensely profitable consequences for the economy of New Zealand? Who'd have guessed that an esoteric and highly experimental novel by an Irish expatriate writer would prompt a famous annual celebration in Dublin, regularly boosting that city's, and country's, coffers? However, winding the route by which these remarkable commercial successes have been attained, they are still, in a creative sense, directly attributable to a thriving and adventurous culture of the humanities — and (in each of the cases just cited) to a government that encourages and rewards the taking of risks.

The collective impact on national economies of such creative programs, prompting as they do so many additional commercial activities, from computer games to fashion design, has been the subject of growing attention over recent years, and of growing political and academic recognition. In the United Kingdom, Tony Blair's Labour Government established a Creative Industries Task Force soon after its election in 1997, to study and promote the phenomenon. In Australia, the Queensland University of Technology, a world leader in this field, has developed a flourishing Creative Industries precinct at its Kelvin Grove campus, and hosts an Australian Research Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation.

But while it is comforting to know that much work in the humanities is commercially productive, this can hardly be the sole or even the principal justification for its existence. Commercial success is entirely incidental to many areas of scholarship in which Australian humanities scholars have achieved outstanding international distinction over recent years, and is seldom the dominant motivation of those who enrol in humanities courses. Senator Kim Carr, Minister for Innovation, Industry, Research, and Science, expressed himself strongly on this matter in a recent Press Club address. 'I believe the creative arts and the humanities and the social

sciences make a terrible mistake when they claim support on the basis of their commercial value,' he said. 'Whatever they may be worth in the marketplace, it is their intrinsic value we should treasure them for. We should support these disciplines because they give us pleasure, knowledge, meaning, and inspiration. No other pay-off is required.'²

Making it new

These are welcome words, not least for their stress on the pleasure and inspiration as well as the hard knowledge that the humanities bring. Yet as the Minister is fully aware, these studies have their practical value as well. 'The humanities, arts, and social sciences,' he declared on the same occasion, 'are critical to solving our most pressing real-world problems. These are problems so complex that our only hope of sorting them out is through a multidisciplinary effort.' Technological ingenuity and know-how are certainly needed in order to confront the big issues of our day: global poverty, climate change, diminishing fuels, turbulent markets, congested cities, booming populations. Yet all of these challenges also demand a deep understanding of the underlying habits of human behaviour. These need also to be addressed if the technical solutions, however brilliant they may be, are to take effect. It is here that the humanities have a particular contribution to make, and here too that the holistic understanding about which Kim Carr speaks — the collaborative sharing of scientific and humanistic knowledge — takes on such importance.

Take (for example) the problem of our ageing population, recently described as 'a greater threat than climate change'. Better lifestyles, improved medical knowledge, and declining fertility rates have combined over recent years to raise dramatically the median age of most of the world's developed countries. Most of us nowadays will enjoy longer lives than our parents and grandparents, while the proportion of those aged under 25, in relation to the population as a whole, is predicted to decline sharply. The consequent shrinkage of the workforce carries severe economic implications. In Australia the percentage of those over 65 and no longer in employment

will more than double by the middle of the century, to reach somewhere between 27% and 30%. At the same time, the number of very old people — ‘old old people’, as the demographers call them — will also increase. Australia could have as many as 12,000 centenarians by 2020, four times the number counted in the last census of 2006. Japan currently has 32,000 centenarians and the United States about 56,000, a number which, according to some estimates, could reach as high as a million by the middle of the century. The problems posed by these ageing populations are multiple and interconnected. There are problems of pensions and savings for economists, employers, financial advisors and politicians to think about; of health and medical services for the gerontologists, nurses, insurance businesses, and age-care specialists to ponder; of accommodation for the elderly that architects and urban planners need to puzzle over. But more fundamentally still there is the massive problem of leisure time and quality of life. What do those in this huge cohort of retirees actually do, in order to keep themselves happy and their minds alert? Literature, art, music, philosophy and language acquisition all may have a particular value here. It has been conjectured that such activities may have more than a recreational function in this regard, helping also to delay the onset of certain forms of mental degeneration: a theory that awaits systematic testing. Philosophy has a further relevance in relation to the complex end-of-life problems that may arise: of knowing when it may be permissible to terminate the life of an incurable and badly suffering patient. These are matters upon which doctors and ethicists must work together, sharing their technical knowledge and argumentative skills.

‘Innovation’ is sometimes mistakenly equated with scientific research. The word means simply making it new: implementing new ideas that may arrive from any quarter. At its richest and most productive, innovation operates through a complex fusion of scientific, technological, creative and humanistic skills. The nature of this process was brilliantly symbolised during the recent opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympic in those superlatively choreographed sequences

reminding the world of China's great contributions to modernisation: its invention (for example) of movable type hundreds of years before Johannes Gutenberg began to experiment with the possibilities of mass printing in Germany in the middle of the 15th century. China's invention of movable type seems to have emerged from a coming together of literary scholars and monks and mathematicians and scribes and artists and technicians. It was a discovery at once humanistic and scientific that changed the nature of scholarship, changed the nature of public knowledge, and changed the nature of the world. In 2008 China chose to celebrate that innovation with a spectacular event that (again) brought together on a massive scale artists, designers, historians, technicians and engineers, reminding the rest of the world, in no uncertain terms, of the country's huge, perpetually self-renewing, creative strength.

'Making it new' was the famous slogan of the Modernist artists and writers of the 1920s, who searched as strenuously as Einstein and his scientific colleagues for new ways of seeing and understanding the world in which they lived. 'Making it new' was the watchword, too, centuries earlier, of the great Renaissance innovators such as Francis Bacon, author of the *New Atlantis* and *Novum Organum*: poet, essayist, philosopher, lawyer, politician, and founder of the new experimental science. In the modern post-enlightenment world, where learning has fissured into its separate branches, departments, divisions, schools and specialisms, such all-round knowledge as Bacon's — the ability to cross effortlessly from one sphere of learning to another — may seem difficult, if not impossible, to attain. Through the very broadness of their concerns, however, the humanities may be well placed to initiate some daring cross-border moves. Some years ago, as anxiety was spreading in Britain and throughout the world over the newly discovered cattle disease known as bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), the Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National University in Canberra organised a colloquium in collaboration with the National Academies Forum (representing the four learned Academies in Australia: of Science, Social Sciences, Technology, and Humanities) that addressed the

subject of 'Mad Cows and Modernity'.³ The meeting brought together, in a unique and illuminating mix, epidemiologists, medical practitioners, economists, pathologists, social and intellectual historians, artists and writers. *Humani nihil alienum* ... well, nothing human, and as it happened, nothing bovine, seemed totally out of bounds on this occasion.

Knowing our place in the world

While the humanities cast a light on contemporary problems, they can also play a seemingly contrary role in countering what might be called the tyranny of presentism: the assumption that the time, place and culture within which we happen presently to live somehow represent the limits and summation of human experience and wisdom. The study of literature, history and art forces us constantly to confront and assess ways of living very different from our own: to look at other historical periods, other sorts of social organisation, other systems of belief, other cultural assumptions, other modes of human behaviour. Sometimes we may be grateful that these other ways of living are indeed not ours. Think of the medical conditions of rural 19th-century France so terrifyingly invoked in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, in which the cripple Hippolyte's anguished screams startle the town, as an eminent visiting surgeon, without benefit of anaesthetics, proceeds to hack through his gangrened leg. Think of the *Disasters of War*, as rendered by Goya, or the scenes of human degradation depicted by Hogarth in *Beer Street* or *Gin Lane*. Think of the behavioural code of the Roman imperial world, in which military leader Crassus, having slaughtered the rebellious slave Spartacus and 12,000 of his men, crucifies 6,000 of the survivors in rows all along the Appian Way from Capua, where the revolt had started, to the walls of Rome. Sometimes we may feel twinges of envy or nostalgia for a world whose style, intimacy or innocence, captured in works of imagination or historical record — the novels of Jane Austen or Henry James, the diaries of James Kilvert or Samuel Pepys — have otherwise largely vanished. Whatever their quality, such imaginative encounters enlarge the mental world in which we live, and

give us another measure by which to judge the world in which we currently live.

Sometimes, however, these encounters with cultures other than our own have the power to teach us a practical lesson: as perhaps, for example, in the case of citizenship.

Citizenship

Once upon a time it was widely assumed that the principal purpose of humane scholarship was to produce good citizens. For the so-called civic humanists, scholars such as Coluccio Salutati in the small city-state of Renaissance Florence, *studia humanitatis* — training in the liberal arts, and in the great classical texts that had helped to shape Greek and Roman civilisations — were thought to make one a wiser, more discerning, more accommodating member of the state. That's what the humanities were essentially for and about. In the more sceptical, pragmatic view of a later theorist such as Thomas Hobbes in England, it was through the processes of humane education that you persuaded naturally self-interested, naturally bellicose individuals voluntarily to surrender certain rights and powers to their rulers, and live together harmoniously within the *civitas*, or commonwealth.

In contemporary Australia, most discussions of citizenship have little to do with the collective inheritance of the past, or what might be learnt from a wider study of the humanities. Recently those wishing to become an Australian citizen had to be able to pass a test which included a range of questions focusing narrowly on aspects of local history: on a handful of basic dates, the names of our early Prime Ministers, the significance of the Gallipoli campaign, the legendary feats of Don Bradman. Revisions in the Australian citizenship test were announced late in 2008 (heralded by one newspaper under the startling headline, 'Bradman dropped from test'). Intending citizens are reminded of those quintessential Australian qualities of mateship and fair play, but not of any wider set of values or human rights. Yet many these days are puzzled by the very notion of citizenship, and what it actually means in these days of increasing globalisation. In Britain

earlier this year Lord Goldsmith's 'citizenship review' provoked quite fiery and sceptical debate, revealing a growing distrust, in an ever more devolved, secular, demographically diverse nation, of what were once assumed to be the common denominators of citizenship: loyalty to monarch, to state religion, to existing structures of law and governance. A similar scepticism has been voiced in recent Australian discussion of this complex topic.⁴

What practical guidance, what longer perspectives, could humanists hope to offer to government on this matter? Here are two brief examples.

In 2004, the Irish philosopher Philip Pettit, formerly of the Australian National University, now at Princeton University, was invited by the Spanish prime minister, Jose Luis Zapatero, to deliver a lecture to a large invited audience in Madrid, with the prime minister seated next to him on the dais. Pettit reports that he was distinctly nervous about this occasion, feeling acutely the risk of his lecture being used merely for political decoration, as he thought the ideas of certain academics in Tony Blair's Britain had been used. The theme of Pettit's lecture was the tradition of civic republicanism and its central concept of political freedom, as developed through the Roman republic, the Italian Renaissance, seventeenth-century English political thought, the American Revolution and War of Independence. At one moment during the lecture, Pettit turned to Zapatero and said (I quote him directly)

— it was meant to be an amusing remark, and it did actually raise some mirth in the audience — I said, 'Look, Mr President, you're going to find it extraordinarily difficult to live up to some of these principles. They sound very fine, and it's very easy for me as a philosopher to spell them out, but it's much, much more difficult for a practising politician.' And the remarkable thing was he was visibly fired up by this challenge, as he saw it, and in his reply to me, he I think put aside what he had meant to say in favour of asserting that he was absolutely committed to the

general principles and the more particular policies supported in this tradition, and he then invited me publicly, which completely threw me, to come back in three years' time, six months before the next election, and review his performance in government for how far I thought it had been faithful to this tradition.⁵

This is an extraordinary and in its way quite electrifying moment, all too rare in contemporary experience, where a political leader listens with such intensity to what a philosopher is telling him about the lessons of history. One senses the nervousness on both sides, the acute awareness of possible bad faith and possible mischance, the anxiety to seize an exceptional educational and political opportunity.

My second example is Naomi Wolf's *The End of America: Letters of Warning to a Young Patriot*, published in 2007 with the stirring subtitle, *A Citizen's Call to Action*. Wolf's letters of warning are also clearly addressed not simply to its formal dedicatee (the 'young patriot': an idealistic young American of her acquaintance), but to the United States President, George W. Bush. They outline the 10 steps by which a democracy can be turned, almost without its citizens noticing it, into a totalitarian state, citing examples from 20th-century history: from Stalinist Russia, from Hitler's Germany, from Mussolini's Italy, from recent dictatorships in Paraguay, Argentina, Brazil, Indonesia, Nicaragua, Uruguay and Guatemala. Wolf argues through these examples that the United States since 9/11 has already advanced well along that particular pathway. Invoking an external and internal threat; establishing secret prisons; developing a paramilitary force; putting ordinary citizens under surveillance; infiltrating citizens' groups; arbitrarily detaining and releasing citizens; targeting key individuals; restricting the press; casting criticism as 'espionage' and dissent as 'treason'; subverting the rule of law: for each of these 10 classic steps in the journey towards totalitarianism, Wolf finds parallels in Bush's America. She goes back further in time, to the origins of the foundational American values of freedom and democracy — those complex terms in whose

name, ironically, the present administration seeks to validate its hardline policies. ‘I am one of the citizens who needed to relearn these lessons’ of the founding fathers, writes Wolf. ‘Though I studied civics, our system of government was taught to me, as it was to you, as a fairly boring explication of a three-part civil bureaucracy, not as the mechanism of a thrilling, radical, and totally unprecedented experiment in human self-determination.’⁶

Wolf’s tone, for understandable reasons, is shriller than Pettit’s, and not always perfectly judged. (If you’re critical of the Bush administration for responding hysterically after 9/11, as if ‘the end of civilisation’ had been reached, it’s perhaps not a wise idea to use a similar rhetoric in the title of your own book, *The End of America*.) Yet these two tiny snapshots of scholars talking publicly, in such contrasting ways, about the significance of citizenship might lead to a couple of concluding questions about the possible future development of the humanities.

First — can the notion of citizenship ever be lifted out of the (indeed ‘fairly boring’) discipline of civics in which it’s currently embedded, and returned to wider contexts in which, once upon a time, it was more fully debated, enlivened, illustrated and understood? Are there possible benefits here not merely for the study of history, political philosophy and classics, but for the humanities more widely?

And second — does the notion of citizenship, deriving from the mentality of the city-state, have continuing force in a world of diminishing frontiers, in which our allegiances and activities may feel increasingly transnational; in which many may wish to style themselves citizens not of a single country, but of the world?

Here are some preliminary thoughts (no more) on the second of these questions, to provoke, perhaps, a fuller debate elsewhere.

While many of the great Renaissance humanists, from whose pioneering studies the very concept of the humanities is ultimately derived, are identified with the city-state, their mental boundaries were often far wider than such a description might suggest. Take, as a single example, the Spanish

scholar Juan Luis Vives: born of a Jewish family in Valencia in 1492, and converted forcibly to Christianity by the Inquisition; a native speaker of Spanish and Valencian, a master of Latin, the global language of his day; a speaker also of English, Flemish, French, Greek and Italian; a graduate of the University of Valencia and the Faculty of Arts in Paris; friend of Erasmus, acquainted with the Netherlands circle; a professor at the University of Louvain; friend of Thomas More, resident for a time in England, lecturing at Oxford; returning constantly to Paris; settling finally in Bruges. That very phrase, *citizen of the world*, is interestingly first recorded in English in the writings of Caxton, around the time of Vives' birth. The concept itself was already well known in ancient Rome. Cicero speaks of *civem totius mundi*: a phrase that signals a readiness to look across national and temporal boundaries; to learn from each other's experience, and to learn also from the past.

The great foundational figures in the humanities were thus in some ways far broader in their knowledge and sympathies than might be thought, and their manifold cultural experiences informed their basic thinking about the concept of citizenship. Yet in certain other ways the *mundus* of which Cicero, for example, pronounced himself a citizen was surprisingly narrow, and not just geographically. It was elite, patrician and rigorously exclusive, comprising the privileged, the well-educated, the builders and guardians of empire. The Ciceronian concept of civilisation, from which the dominant modern practice of the humanities might be said largely to derive, excluded the uninitiated, and kept the barbarians firmly outside the city gates. The present challenge for the humanities is to think across conceptual as well as national boundaries: to imagine new kinds of engagement, with the disenfranchised, the underprivileged, the resistant, the alien, as well as those within the familiar circle of Western liberal discourse. At the heart of this reconstruction lies a new understanding of what it might mean to be a citizen, and to be, in the fullest sense, humane.

Reorienting the humanities

One scholar's example might provide a hint as to how this realignment of the humanities could proceed. During the final months of his life, the late Edward Said delivered in 2002 a series of lectures at Cambridge University on the theme of *Humanism and Knowledge* that served as an eloquent summation of a lifetime's thinking and writing in and about the humanities.⁷ Said began by noting the way in which apparently liberal-minded Western scholars had grown accustomed to lamenting the failure of humanism and the humanities in general, and gloomily pronouncing their 'crisis' or demise. But the failure, he suggested, might lie rather in the narrowness with which such scholars envisaged these terms. Many did not think beyond the particular academic disciplines or social or cultural tradition in which they themselves happened to have grown up, and their view of humanism and the humanities was often as a consequence elitist, defensive, partial and despondent. Said offered a more optimistic, open and pluralistic view of the humanities that embraced forms of knowledge from the East as well as from the West, that addressed contemporary as well as historical issues, that gave importance to social and political questions as well as literary and philological. The heroes that emerged from Said's analysis were the great polymaths such as Goethe, Giambattista Vico and Erich Auerbach, who had the courage to engage with cultural and intellectual traditions other than their own, and find wisdom in them. To maintain and renew their force in the world, the humanities must have at their core a courage and openness of the kind that Edward Said advocated, and in his own life exemplified, as a true citizen of the world.

Endnotes

- 1 McCalman, I. (2004). The National Press Club Telstra address, *Making culture bloom*. Canberra, Australia: Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences.
- 2 Senator the Hon Kim Carr, 'The Art of Innovation', Address to the National Press Club, Canberra, 3 September, 2008.

- 3 McCalman, I., (Ed.), with Penny, B., & Cook, M. (1998). *Mad cows and modernity: Cross-disciplinary reflections on the crisis of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease*, Canberra, Australia: Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University, and the National Academies Forum.
- 4 See, for example, Hindess, B., 'Limits to Citizenship' in Hudson, W., & Kane, J., (2000), *Rethinking Australian citizenship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. In Britain, Sir Bernard Crick, Emeritus Professor of Politics at the University of London, has been advising the Labour Government on a number of issues relating to citizenship, and has published extensively on this subject. See, for example, his edited volume, *Citizens: Towards a citizenship culture*, Malden MA, 2001.
- 5 From a discussion with Alan Saunders on *The Philosopher's Zone*, ABC Radio National, 16 February 2008: <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/philosopherszone/stories/2008/2160497.htm>
- 6 Wolf, N., (2007). *The end of America: Letters of warning to a young patriot. A citizen's call to action*. Melbourne, Australia: Scribe.
- 7 The lectures were published after Said's death in a revised form as *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, Columbia University Press, New York, c. 2004.



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