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## The Public Role of Humanities Scholarship, in the Humboldtian Tradition

ABSTRACT

What sort of contribution to the public weal constitutes a natural extension of the goals and values of humanities scholarship, and what sort a *betrayal*? This essay aims to shed light on this question by restating one historically influential conception of humanities scholarship and speculating about how humanities scholarship thus understood might play a positive role in society without betraying its own distinctive mission. The view of humanities scholarship adopted here is inspired by a broad humanistic tradition developed by thinkers like Wilhelm von Humboldt, John Henry Newman, and Karl Jaspers. This tradition views humanistic scholarship not only as the soul of the university, but also as a promoter of high culture and truth in society at large. In the context of the increasingly fashionable notion of “public humanities,” this essay offers a restatement of the traditional view of humanities scholarship and a brief discussion of the challenges of “doing public humanities” while honouring a broadly Humboldtian ideal of humanistic research and teaching.

KEYWORDS: Humboldt, Newman, humanities, public humanities, high culture

What is the public role of humanities scholarship? Or, to be more precise, what *ought* to be the public role of humanities scholarship? This is a much vexed question in the current climate in which humanities scholarship is under increasing pressure to legitimate its existence within the modern university by proving its positive “impact” on society, its economic “productivity,” and its ability to enhance the prestige of its patrons. In this climate, the very question, “What is the public role of humanities scholarship?” may appear to be loaded in favour of those who are skeptical about its intrinsic value or legitimacy, or at least who wish to view humanities scholarship largely in instrumental terms. For example, it is easy to imagine a policy-maker asking this question but *really* meaning, “How can humanities scholarship advance public policy goals, or create better citizens, or advance economic prosperity?” Understood in this way, by characterizing a role as “public,” one is subsuming it under problems of governance and social and economic policy, viewing it through the lens of the statesman or policy-maker.

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While it may be reasonable in certain contexts or for limited purposes to consider the value of humanities scholarship as a function of independent values, such as the cultivation of good citizenship, the generation of wealth, or the enhancement of social prestige, this approach cannot provide the basis for a general account of the public role of humanities scholarship, since it effectively bypasses the internal logic of the practice as it has been traditionally understood, or at the very least assumes a radically revised understanding of the practice, something which must be argued for rather than taken for granted. If we do not take seriously the purposes of humanities scholarship *as viewed by its own practitioners*, who most certainly do not see themselves as instruments of public policy, then we are liable to impose a role on humanities scholarship that contradicts its own internal logic and is unrecognizable to its own practitioners. In doing so, we would be attempting to remake a practice in the image and likeness of our own agenda, forcing the practice to serve goals external to it without any due consideration for the relation between those external goals and the goals directly constitutive of the practice itself.<sup>1</sup> If we go about defining the public role of humanities scholarship in this way, i.e., from the perspective of non-practitioners, we are not interpreting humanities scholarship as a distinctive practice, but moulding it to the “public roles” non-practitioners would like it to serve, or forcing it to assume the logic of some other practice, such as a market economy, a corporation, or a philanthropic association.

The central guiding intuition of this paper is that prior to determining what the public role of humanities scholarship ought to be, we need to understand what it is that has historically distinguished humanities scholarship from other practices, and how this particular human practice fits into a larger web of social practices and institutions. If we are to avoid interpreting the “public role” of humanities scholarship in the image and likeness of an external rationale that distorts the meaning of the practice from the perspective of its own practitioners, then we must understand the term “public role” primarily from the standpoint of the practice of humanities scholarship itself, and its own efforts to fit into its host society. Given our participation in a practice with its own distinctive purposes and excellences, what sort of contribution can we, humanities scholars, properly make to our host society without violating the fundamental values and goals that constitute the practice of humanities scholarship? What sort of contribution to society at large constitutes a natural extension of

<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that humanities scholarship cannot legitimately respond to goals such as fundraising, marketing, or the generation of employment. Nonetheless, any clear-headed discussion of the value of humanities scholarship must give primacy to the goals that give the practice its distinctive character.

the goals and values of humanities scholarship, and what sort of *betrayal* of those goals and values?<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of this essay is to shed some light on this question by restating one historically influential conception of the nature and goals of humanities scholarship, understood as the nucleus of the modern university, and speculating about how humanities scholarship thus understood might interact with other social practices and play a positive role in society without betraying its own distinctive mission. The view of humanities scholarship I will describe here is one that has had a significant influence in the modern university, first in Europe, and subsequently, in other parts of the world, insofar as their academic cultures were influenced (though obviously not narrowly determined), by the European tradition.<sup>3</sup> This model views the university, as a whole, as a fundamentally humanistic enterprise, geared toward the pursuit of the truth about human beings and the world around them rather than the collection of disparate facts, techniques, or fragments of knowledge; and consequently views humanistic scholarship, just insofar as it seeks an integrated and humanistic form of knowledge, as the heart of the university enterprise, as that without which the university ceases to exist as such.

This model of humanities scholarship and its place in the university, associated in particular with figures like Wilhelm von Humboldt, Karl Jaspers, and John Henry Newman,<sup>4</sup> has been increasingly challenged both in Europe and the United States, both by transformations in popular and elite perceptions of the university, and shifting priorities and values among university administrators and scholars themselves. Nonetheless,

2 I take it that this approach is broadly consonant with that of David Shumway (■■■■), whose advocacy of the public humanities involves an *extension*, not a negation, of the goods internal to the practice of humanities scholarship.

3 In this connection, I fully accept Shumway's point that the American universities tended, on balance, to have a stronger orientation toward professional life ("improved employment potential"), than their European counterparts. Nonetheless, the influence of the European tradition remains strong, as evidenced by the continuing relevance of the Humboldtian perspective in American debates about the value of the humanities.

4 Jaspers reiterates and amplifies upon aspects of the Humboldtian view, which tends toward an Enlightenment view of rationality as independent from authority; Newman, writing before Jaspers, writes within the British university tradition, and views rationality as bounded within the authority of tradition. All three, however, converge on the view that the liberal arts, and the university as a whole, find their *raison d'être* in the pursuit of truth undistorted by arbitrary external demands. See in particular John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955) and Karl Jaspers, *The Idea of the University* (London: Peter Owen, 1959). For other treatments of the university that place the quest for truth centre stage, cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities: A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009) and Manuel García Morente, *El ideal universitario y otros ensayos* (Eunsa, 2012), 11–38.

my purpose here is not to launch an apologetic speech on behalf of the traditional Humboldtian university, but to restate the view as concisely as possible, and explore some of its implications for the public role of humanities scholarship. In this way, what I hope to contribute to the discussion of “public humanities” is the restatement of a view of humanities scholarship that had a formative influence upon the emergence of the modern university,<sup>5</sup> and a brief discussion of the challenges of implementing this ideal in the contemporary world. What makes such an exercise interesting and worthwhile is, first, that it engages with a conception of the university and of the liberal arts that, in spite of its pedigree and influence, is given little serious attention in contemporary universities; and second, that in spite of its many detractors, it is a tradition that is capable of explaining how a university is something quite distinct from a multinational corporation, an ideological training camp, a philanthropic association, or a political party.

The discussion will proceed in four stages:

- (i) I begin by clarifying the type of question we are asking when we ask, “What is the public role of humanities scholarship?”
- (ii) I then offer a broadly Humboldtian account of the practice of humanities scholarship and its animating goals, viewed as constitutive of the goals of the university as well.
- (iii) Third, I offer a rough account of the institutional environment in which the practice of humanities scholarship is currently embodied, highlighting how dependent the study of the liberal arts is for its survival and health upon individual and collective actors, both internal and external to the university.
- (iv) Finally, in light of the value and goals of humanities scholarship and its operating environment, I indicate some of the main ways it can play a constructive role in society without betraying its underlying *raison d’être*.

#### 1. WHAT SORT OF QUESTION ARE WE ASKING?

Three general remarks are worth making with a view to clarifying the nature of the question, “What is the public role of humanities scholarship?”: first, it is important to keep in mind that such a question can only be adequately tackled by the very persons whose activity is being interpreted, and is thus necessarily *reflexive*. The interpreter is interrogating the meaning of his own practice, which naturally implicates the

5 Its influence, though formative especially in the Germanic and Anglo-Saxon traditions, was much more limited in France, where Napoleon imposed rigorous state supervision over the curriculum, research activities, and internal structures of the national university system.

meaning of his own life as a scholar and as a human being. It is *we humanities scholars* who are best positioned to inquire into the values and goals of humanities scholarship, since we dedicate large chunks of our lives to serving and interpreting these values and goals. Others may of course also embark on such an inquiry, but only to the extent that they enter sympathetically into the perspective of the practitioner.

Second, like many questions tackled in the humanities, this is the sort of question that does not admit of easy, precise, conclusive, or incontestable answers. Given the depth and complexity of the question, and the types of neighbouring questions about human life that it implicates (e.g. the vocation of the scholar, the point of studying literature, the value of reflection and critique), it lends itself to provisional or dialectical answers, always improvable and corrigible through conversation, rather than “conversation-stopping” answers akin to mathematical theorems. But this does not mean that we cannot address the underlying question in meaningful ways, or that all answers are equally valid, nor does it prevent us from attaining genuine insights about the subject.

Finally, there is no “value-free” answer to the question, since any answer we give will assume the salience of some values and purposes over others within the practice, and that salience is justified by a particular interpretation of the practice as a whole, rather than by some convergence of *actual* choices or policies on the part of humanities scholars. In other words, the question of the public role of humanities scholarship calls forth an unapologetically *normative* judgment. It cannot be answered by a mere survey of behavioural trends among humanities scholars and institutes.

## 2. THE NATURE AND GOALS OF HUMANITIES SCHOLARSHIP

Humanities scholarship is not merely an ethereal idea, but a real human activity, embodied in space and time, and conducted within a variety of institutional contexts. It is only because we see humanities scholarship as a special type of human activity or enterprise that we can intelligibly attribute a public role to it (it would be strange to speak of the “public role” of human existence or human activity in general). But what *type* of human activity or enterprise is humanities scholarship? It seems to me that we can usefully employ the language of *social practice* as a formal interpretive lens for specifying what sort of activity humanities scholarship is.

If we wish to interpret humanities scholarship using the language of social practices, the first logical step is to sketch out the basic elements of a social practice. For that purpose, I rely principally on Alasdair MacIntyre’s account, according to which a social practice is “[a] coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the

course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to ... that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended."<sup>6</sup> Following MacIntyre's approach, it seems to me that we can usefully distinguish between:

- (a) a social *practice*, a complex co-operative activity which aims at achieving certain ends and at developing certain related excellences in its practitioners;
- (b) the *immediate institutional framework* within which the practice is embodied, which may be more or less faithful to the ends and excellences constitutive of the practice itself; and
- (c) conditioning and dependent institutions and practices.

The boundaries between the practice itself, its immediate institutional framework, and conditioning and dependent institutions and practices, are not always clear-cut, but some provisional boundaries must be drawn if we are to make sense of the tensions that occur (a) within the practice itself; (b) between the practitioners and their host institutions; and (c) between either the practice or its institutional embodiment and neighbouring institutions and practices. Hopefully this will all become clearer when we interpret humanities scholarship through this interpretive framework.

As I pointed out earlier, the proper public role of humanities scholarship is a question that is unlikely to admit of definitive or "conversation-stopping" answers, any more than the distinctive goods, excellences, and purposes of the practice of humanities scholarship are susceptible to an uncontroversial or incontestable description. The most we can hope for is to articulate a provisional and partial answer that is plausibly anchored in the practice as we have received it, and that may advance the conversation, and begin to illuminate our understanding. Many books and articles have been written on the value and purpose of humanities scholarship. It is impossible for me to do justice to that extended conversation here.<sup>7</sup> Instead, what I intend to do is to propose one simple answer that I hope captures some important truths about the practice, an answer that

6 See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981), 187. The core of MacIntyre's account of practices and their relation to institutions can be found in the same work on pp. 187–203. For other discussions of social practices, cf. Raimo Tuomela, *The Philosophy of Social Practices: A Collective Acceptance View* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Theodore R. Schatzki, *Social Practices: A Wittgensteinian Approach to Human Activity and the Social* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and Carlo Sini, *Gli Abiti, Le Pratiche, I Saperi* (Milan: Jaca Book, 1996).

7 For just a few examples of discussions of the humanities and of the closely related question of the nature of the modern university, see Helen Small, *The Value of the Humanities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Bill Readings, *The University*

leaves much room for discussion and elaboration, but that has an established historical pedigree and does offer a possible explanation of what it is that distinguishes humanities scholarship from other social practices.

Humanities scholarship as such did not exist until the birth of modern science, which separated the study of the natural universe from the study of human nature, art, and morality. This separation was subsequently reflected in the separation within the modern university between science and “arts and letters” or humanities. However, the vision I propose to consider in this essay locates humanistic research and reflection at the heart of rational inquiry and at the heart of the university enterprise as such, rather than in a sort of disciplinary “ghetto” or isolated department. The vision I propose to consider, associated with figures such as Wilhelm von Humboldt, John Henry Newman, and Karl Jaspers, sees humanistic scholarship and teaching as *the* nuclear activity of the university and the polestar of human knowledge more generally. The story of humanistic scholarship, on this account, coincides largely with the history of the university. This is not to say that humanities scholarship was absent outside of the university, but rather, to suggest that the typical site within which humanistic research and teaching was conducted, both in medieval and modern times, has been within the walls of the university. Therefore, the nature and goals of humanities scholarship cannot be understood apart from the nature and goals of the university.

Speaking from the perspective of the Humboldtian tradition of higher learning, which – understood broadly – encompasses thinkers as diverse as Karl Jaspers, John Henry Newman, Manuel García Morentes, and Alasdair Macintyre, the university is an institution that is marked out from other institutions in one singular respect: among all human institutions, it stands out as *a community of scholars and students devoted to the pursuit of truth, valued as an end in itself, through rational inquiry in all fields of human knowledge*. One might consider the ancient academies such as the Athenian school of the Peripatetics as the first “universities,” since they too seem to fit this definition. However, these academies did not have the strong links with, and openness to, the wider social order that the medieval *studium generale* and the modern university do, nor did they have anything like the same degree of professionalization and accreditation that we associate with the medieval and modern universities. For these reasons, it is traditionally considered that the university was “born” around 1200 AD in medieval Europe, with the emergence of

*in Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Sheldon Rothblatt, *The Modern University and Its Discontents: The Fate of Newman's Legacies in Britain and America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Stefan Collini, *What are Universities For?* (London: Penguin, 2012); and Morente, “El Cultivo de las Humanidades,” in Morente, *El ideal universitario y otros ensayos*, 39–58.

centers of higher learning, devoted to the study of the liberal arts as a preparation for advanced studies in theology, law, and medicine.

Now, if we consider the university to be a community of scholars and students devoted to the rational pursuit of truth in all fields of knowledge, then we can identify a number of institutional ends that further this overarching purpose, and we can distinguish these ends from other ends which may be legitimate and important in themselves, but are not what distinguish a university from other institutions. What, then, are the ends that directly participate in the university's truth-seeking mission, and what are the ends that are auxiliary or secondary with respect to this mission?

The primary or constitutive ends of the university as a community of truth-seekers are: (1) to promote scientific and methodologically rigorous research across the full gamut of human knowledge; (2) to transmit to students an aptitude for, and commitment to, relentlessly pursue the truth about themselves and the world, both on a theoretical and a practical plane. The *secondary* end which almost all universities at all times have served is (3) the transmission of know-how and skills required for professional life. I call this end secondary, because it is a form of practical knowledge and training that, while immensely useful and beneficial, is only successfully incorporated into the university insofar as it is integrated into the *uncompromising pursuit of truth* that constitutes the university and gives it its identity as a university. For example, a business school that transmits technical skills and qualifications, but aims at little more than to make its graduates "competitive" on the job market, may be an educational institution, but it is *not* a university.<sup>8</sup>

Now, let me say a little more about the primary ends of the university:

1. *To promote scientific and methodologically rigorous research across the full gamut of human knowledge*

The university is a community of rational inquirers. While some or all of its members may be persons of religious faith or members of political parties, the university as such is neither a center of spiritual formation

<sup>8</sup> I should clarify that I am not here attempting to capture common usage of the term "university" among contemporary university administrators or faculty members, but the meaning of the term in the humanist tradition led by Humboldt and Newman, which is the focus of my presentation. The university, viewed from this tradition, may have numerous other secondary purposes, that is, purposes that are not essential to its identity *as a university*, yet may be noble and conducive to the common good, such as volunteering in community projects, visiting the sick and homebound, and so forth. I will not discuss these purposes, not because I consider them unimportant, but because they are peripheral to the core mission of a university as a university, and are not something that the university is uniquely equipped to offer when compared with other institutions.



nor a political party. What distinguishes a university is that its members pursue the truth through *disciplined rational inquiry*. Research conducted according to accepted scientific or logically rigorous methods has become one of the cornerstones of rational inquiry in the modern university.<sup>9</sup> As such, the university has a responsibility to promote and facilitate research activities in the human and natural sciences as part of its core mission.<sup>10</sup> It is important to note, however, that rigorous methods should not be understood to mean either “value-free” methods, or purely empirical methods. There are different methodological requirements in mathematics, theology, philosophy, philology, political science, and chemistry. The rational pursuit of truth requires methodological rigor, but it also requires methodological pluralism since different subject-matters require different methods.

2. *To transmit to students an aptitude for and commitment to relentless pursuit of the truth*

A university is a community of scholars and students that can only persist and thrive over time if it succeeds in passing on to future generations an aptitude for and commitment to vigorously pursue the truth through rational inquiry. Truth in this context is not to be understood merely as a catalogue of facts about the world. Rather, truth should be understood existentially and holistically as the nature of the world, of the human being, and of the meaning of life. Loyalty to truth, which is at the very heart of university life, is not a purely technical competence, although it does involve technical aptitudes or skills such as the ability to make logical inferences. Rather, it is a *way of life*, for which the university community is supposed to prepare us morally and intellectually. Furthermore, the truth is demanding. It presses upon us, beckons us to respect it and to pursue it, even if this requires us to leave our “comfort zone,” work very hard, or expose ourselves to serious risks. Just consider what it implied for university professors who refused to preach a Nazi ideology in German universities in the 1930s. Or, to take a more mundane case,

9 The concept of “research” and the university’s commitment to original and methodologically rigorous research were only consolidated during the modernization of the university. While there were great and original thinkers in the medieval university, there was not a programmatic commitment to “produce” original research, more to *transmit* the most respected and authoritative knowledge and learning of the age.

10 Humboldt, Jaspers, and García Morente seem to believe this, but interestingly, Newman seems to see original research as peripheral, if not dispensable, to a university’s mission. “If its object were scientific and philosophical discovery,” he says, “I do not see why a University should have students.” He does not seem to consider or take seriously the Humboldtian view that teaching and research are mutually reinforcing aspects of the pursuit of truth.

consider the price a university professor may pay today for maintaining his commitment to deep and reflective scholarship in an environment in which quantity of publications is valued more highly than the quality of their content.

In order to realize this way of life, scholars must cultivate in themselves and in their students a form of knowledge and learning that raises the students' sights and sensibilities above narrow and specialized forms of knowledge, toward the good, the true, and the beautiful in their most mundane and sublime forms. Students should be inspired with a thirst for finding a deeper and broader meaning not only in the subjects they study, but also in their personal and social lives. They must be given the opportunity to free themselves from the shackles of purely utilitarian and consumerist thinking, to pursue the truth for its own sake, both the truth embodied in theoretical knowledge, and the truth embodied in moral action. This sensibility or taste for truth, while it responds to our deepest spiritual needs, does not develop automatically, except perhaps in some exceptionally gifted and motivated students: it needs to be carefully cultivated. This is the primary purpose of university education. Although Newman describes the goal of university education as intellectual formation rather than as moral training, what he describes as "the culture of the intellect" is clearly a moral quality, a disposition of character, not just a technical competence. The goal of a university education, from Newman's perspective, is "not the manners and habits of gentlemen," but "the force, the steadiness, the comprehensiveness and the versatility of intellect, the command over our own powers, the instinctive just estimate of things as they pass before us," while its fruits are "courtesy, propriety, and polish of word and action."<sup>11</sup>

But how can this thirst for truth and this aptitude for its pursuit be cultivated in the university? The time-honoured answer, given by Humboldt, Newman, and Jaspers, and practised in the nineteenth century in German and British universities, and to some extent in a small number of colleges today, is through the study of the "liberal arts," also known as the "humanities." In medieval times, the liberal arts served as a preparation for advanced studies in theology, law, and medicine. They were divided into the "Quadrivium" of music, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy; and the "Trivium" of grammar, logic, and rhetoric. During the Renaissance, classical literature, history, and philosophy became incorporated into the ideal of a liberal education.

The liberal arts have been understood since antiquity as those fields of knowledge that give one sufficient dominion of one's own faculties, and sufficient capacity for rational reflection, to think and act as a *free* human being, taking one's position in the public square on an equal footing with one's fellow citizens, and were contrasted with the "servile" arts, to be

<sup>11</sup> Newman, *The Idea of a University*, pp. 9–10.

carried out by servants and slaves, who were thought not to have a sufficient level of education to deliberate in the political arena as full citizens. The ideal of a liberal education, though rooted historically in heavily ascriptive social orders, has a more democratic expression in modern societies, where liberal education is offered to citizens from all walks of life, not just to an aristocratic or leisured class. Although in its most ancient meaning, the liberal arts are those arts that can be practised by someone who has the status of a "freeman," they have also typically been understood as those arts that give expression to the distinctively human capacity for rational reflection and choice. Modern advocates of liberal education such as Humboldt, Jaspers, and Newman viewed a liberal education as conferring upon students the capacity to rise above their unreflective prejudices and attain a more complete and synthetic view of the world.<sup>12</sup>

The connection between the study of the liberal arts and freedom of choice and reflection should become apparent if we consider just a few of the subjects that are now considered integral to a liberal arts education. Consider philosophy: understood through a classical lens, philosophy is the "love of wisdom." Philosophical inquiry aims to uncover the meaning of human life and the world around us, not merely as a tool for some other end, but also for the sake of understanding itself. Approaching reality with true intellectual curiosity and a desire to learn is a disposition that both inspires, and is fostered by, the pursuit of philosophical inquiry. Without the capacity to question the meaning of life and put conventional truths to the test, we are more enslaved to the flow of the "status quo." In a similar way, the study of history can dislodge deep-seated prejudices and highlight both the limitations and strengths of our present achievements, by opening our eyes to the different perspectives of other historical epochs. And the study of literature can broaden our imagination, helping us empathize with cultural, moral, and historical perspectives that were hitherto alien or unknown to us. While a liberal education does not automatically produce saints or eliminate all forms of irrational prejudice, these are just some examples of the ways in which a liberal education can broaden a student's intellectual, historical, and moral horizons, and facilitate a form of reflection that is less mean-spirited and confining, more generous and liberating.

### 3. THE CURRENT INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT OF HUMANITIES SCHOLARSHIP

What I have suggested so far is that the university is an inter-generational co-operative activity among scholars and students, devoted to the pursuit

<sup>12</sup> This is reflected in Newman's view that the university is "a place of teaching universal knowledge" (*Ibid.*, p. 3)

of the truth about the human being and the world around him; and that the liberal arts or humanities are the studies that free us from uncritical impulses and train our minds in the capacity to make more or less impartial judgments about the human condition and about the world around us. In short, the liberal arts or the humanities are at the very heart of what a university is all about: the untrammelled pursuit of truth in all fields of knowledge.

Assuming that this is roughly how humanities scholarship should be understood, this still leaves open the question: Which institutional arrangement can best facilitate the goals and excellences of such a practice? Today, humanities scholarship is normally given its primary institutional embodiment through the modern university system, which generally assigns scholars to subject-specific departments, with fixed salaries, teaching duties, and certain formal procedures implemented by university faculty and staff for either rewarding acceptable scholarly activity, penalizing inadequate scholarly activity, or discontinuing employment if the quality and/or output of scholarship falls below a certain threshold.<sup>13</sup> Although scholars often collaborate internally within their respective universities and departments, whether by exchanging papers informally or presenting their work at departmental colloquia, a large part of scholarly collaboration and sharing happens *across* universities, both through the *ad hoc* exchange of work and ideas, and through conferences, seminars, invited speakers, visiting researchers, and so forth.<sup>14</sup>

The university as we know it today emerged during the course of the nineteenth century. In Europe this occurred largely under the tutelage of the modern nation-state, with the most significant transformation occurring as part of an effort to consolidate a national culture, promote advances in scientific and humanistic research, and to train those who were to occupy posts in education and in the civil service. At the heart of this revolution was the transformation of higher education from a feudal, regional, and largely ecclesial system focused mostly on vocational training and the transmission of learning to future generations, into a national system funded, governed and administered, in large part, by the state, and focused on the promotion of original research, the ideal of liberal education, and the training of candidates for the civil service. In some cases (such as that of Oxbridge), the church still exerted significant control, right up to the early twentieth century, but for the most part, the

<sup>13</sup> Of course, those who have attained tenure do not usually face the threat of redundancy. But they may be penalized in other ways, e.g., through promotional decisions, teaching loads, etc.

<sup>14</sup> Notwithstanding this observation, much scholarly work is notoriously lonely and the pressure to produce a high quantity of original research can unwittingly inhibit faculty collaboration and undermine the traditional ideal of the university as a *community* of scholars and students.

balance of control was quickly tipped strongly in favour of the State, indeed in many cases to the virtual exclusion of ecclesial authority.<sup>15</sup>

The co-option and modernization of universities by the state opened an era of significant growth and development, in particular in the areas of philosophical and scientific research. Wilhelm von Humboldt, who served as Prussian minister of education from 1809 to 1810, instituted a massive overhaul of the Prussian university system, led by its new flagship university, the University of Berlin. Under Humboldt's direction, university education was made available to a wider public, and philosophy and the liberal arts, in particular classical philology, were given a privileged place in Prussian (and later, German), higher education. Humboldt developed an ideal of the university and its place in society which had significant influence upon European thinking about the university well into the twentieth century, and even today is an essential point of reference for debates about the university. According to the Humboldtian ideal, (a) the university was a place where the truth was to be pursued for its own sake, free from arbitrary political or economic interference, a principle that entailed (b) a commitment to original research, (c) a commitment to liberal education, i.e., an education that would instill in students a taste for the true, the good, and the beautiful; and (d) the unity of research and teaching as intimately dependent and reinforcing practices. Finally, less directly entailed by the pursuit of truth, and less essential to the core mission of the university, yet obviously of the utmost value to the nation and state, (e) the university was the privileged site for the preservation and enrichment of the best of national culture, and (f) the university was a training ground for future civil servants and politicians.<sup>16</sup>

Humboldt believed it was the responsibility of the State to finance and oversee the national university system. By providing the university system with legal, political, and financial protection, the State could thereby protect it from economic and political pressures to deviate from its

<sup>15</sup> This is true of all universities in Europe, but the dominance of the state was especially marked in France after the Napoleonic reforms of the university, which all but obliterated the juridical autonomy of the universities, brought an end to the dominance of the church in higher education, and put the management of the university system firmly in the hands of ministers and servants of the State. For historical accounts of the emergence of the modern university, see inter alia Robert Anderson, *European Universities from the Enlightenment to 1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Robert Anderson, *British Universities Past and Present* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006); and Laurence R. Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965). For a detailed treatment of the history of the university from medieval to modern times, see Hilde de Ridder-symoens, ed., *A History of the University in Europe*, vols 1, 2, 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, 1996, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> The Humboldtian view of the university is well-known, but for one summary of it, see Marek Kwiek, "The Classical German Idea of the University Revisited," [http://www.cpp.amu.edu.pl/pdf/CPP\\_RPS\\_vol.1\\_Kwiek.pdf](http://www.cpp.amu.edu.pl/pdf/CPP_RPS_vol.1_Kwiek.pdf). Center for Public Policy Studies, Poznan, vol. 1, 2006.

commitment to truth. It was in the best interest of the State to provide this sort of protection, not only because a strong university system would advance national culture and train the civil service, but also because any civilized society has a strong interest in having protected spaces for the untrammelled pursuit of truth.

The Humboldtian view of the university seems in retrospect quite unrealistic, especially in its belief that a university system sponsored by the state and associated with a nation-building project could be truly free to pursue the truth wherever it leads. It also seemed to overlook the danger of universities abusing their internal freedom by engaging in nepotistic hiring practices and neglecting serious scholarship. Nonetheless, in practice many European and British university systems could be characterized, for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as systems of generous state financing and limited "micromanagement" by the state in their day-to-day affairs and hiring practices. Thus, it would appear that during this period the intense dependency of the European university on the state was reconcilable, at least in many cases, with a substantial degree of academic and managerial freedom within the universities. Furthermore, this period of state patronage witnessed the thriving of a strong tradition of liberal education in Germany and in the United Kingdom. During this period, many universities in Europe, especially in Britain and Germany, had the opportunity and resources to engage in research and teaching relatively undistorted by economic and political pressures emanating from outside the university's walls.

For better or for worse, the era of the national state-sponsored university is gradually coming to an end in Europe. While the exact outcome of this transformation is not altogether clear, the main changes one can observe over the past twenty or thirty years, which seem to be even more pronounced as we enter the twenty-first century, are (a) a progressive retreat of the state from the business of funding universities, (b) a growing dependence of the university on private capital and competitive grants, whether in the private or public sector, (c) a much more selective system of public financing, characterized by highly competitive and often utilitarian or policy-driven criteria of eligibility, (d) an unprecedented level of bureaucratization and managerialism within the university and in its relations with other institutions, characterized by a near-obsession with statistical and numerical measures of excellence and the standardization of teaching and research,<sup>17</sup> (e) the introduction of the university

<sup>17</sup> Witness the "European Higher Education Area" created by the 1999 Bologna Accords, the most detailed and ambitious attempt yet to impose a single structure of teaching and accreditation on all universities in the European Union. Witness the "REF" (Research Excellence Framework) system of evaluation for determining eligibility for public funding in British universities, a centralized assessment system that categorizes departments and universities according to their research performance and productivity.

into a global research community and educational market, and concomitantly, its dethronement as the privileged guardian of “national culture,” (f) the progressive fragmentation or hyper-specialization of knowledge, not only between science and the humanities (already part of the Enlightenment inheritance), but also among different fields and subfields of scientific and humanistic knowledge, and (g) the emergence of a public philosophy that views all forms of knowledge and labour as deriving their value from their economic productivity or their contribution to the solution of tangible social problems.

For much of its life – certainly up to the first half of the twentieth century – the state-sponsored university system, at least in Britain and Germany, included an important position for liberal education and permitted research and teaching to proceed largely free from external economic and political pressures. But by the turn of the twenty-first century, the dominant ethos and patronage structure of European universities had undergone significant transformations. The national state-funded university that had defined European higher education for over two centuries, and, to a greater or lesser extent paid homage to the Humboldtian ideal in its day-to-day operations, had gradually been replaced by a post-national university system which had largely abandoned the ideal of liberal education, in deed if not in word. The post-national university in Europe and North America alike had, by the turn of the twenty-first century, succumbed to hyper-specialization and the bureaucratization of teaching and research, in addition to becoming heavily dependent on competitive public and private funding (though this dependency has typically been less pronounced in the United States, at least among major universities in possession of ample endowments).

From a Humboldtian perspective, the post-national university regime, notwithstanding its genuine achievements (e.g. improvements in the rigour and quality of research), is liable to put in jeopardy the truth-seeking mission of the university in a number of ways:

- (1) The hyper-specialization of knowledge runs directly contrary to the notion that a university is a single community attempting to illuminate different aspects of the same reality.
- (2) The hyper-bureaucratization of research and teaching heavily reduces the scope for creative experimentation in research and teaching. It also stands as a visible contradiction of the notion of liberal education as preparation for free and independent inquiry.
- (3) The culture of managerialism, with its fondness for statistical and numerical performance indicators, is likely to incentivize universities and scholars to orient their intellectual labours toward the production of favourable performance indicators, e.g., through the prolific production of “high-impact” journal articles, rather

than orienting their intellectual labours to a broad and deep vision of the world. Similarly, the culture of managerialism, if it takes hold in university administrators, leads universities to make institutional decisions geared toward enhancing their institution's position in some "ranking" rather than (except accidentally) advancing the intrinsic goods of the intellectual life, or cultivating a community of scholars devoted to the pursuit of the truth.

- (4) The dependence on state funding could be reconciled in the modern university with freedom of research and teaching in an environment of relatively ample resources in which the State was more or less sympathetic to the freedom of the university to pursue its own mission. In stark contrast to this, the dependence on state funding in a situation of scarce resources in which the State engages in detailed and periodic assessments of the quality and output of research and teaching is hardly conducive to the freedom of research and teaching! In this environment of scarcity, in which one must conform to a very specific and uniform vision of "excellence" as a condition for earning the State's support, whether corporately or individually, many legitimate approaches to research and writing will likely be suppressed and pressure will likely be applied to tailor the interests and intellectual passions of the scholar, including his passion for the truth, to the performance indicators set down by some national or international regulatory body, as a condition for professional advancement. In practice, this means that scholars will have to publish in certain venues and not others, and will have to work at the rhythm and in the manner set down by some regulatory body outside their own universities. Since these regulatory bodies typically demand standardized, quantifiable and widely accessible tokens of "excellence," quantitative variables such as "impact factors" and citation counts quickly become more important than the intrinsic quality of a scholar's ideas and arguments.
- (5) Apart from the dependence on scarce state funding with many strings attached to it, universities are now heavily dependent on private finance. In the case of large and established private universities such as Harvard or Notre Dame, this dependence on private donors does not generally hurt the freedom of scholars to pursue the truth, because the universities have a solid and ample donor base and very sizeable endowments to protect them in hard times. However, in the case of European universities, which have developed deep-seated habits of dependency on the state and do not have a donor base or private endowments comparable to their American counterparts, their dependence on private capital is much more worrying. It makes them economically unstable,



and it puts substantial pressure on them to adapt their activities and mission to the highest bidder. Indeed, in Europe, unlike in America, it is commonplace for humanities researchers to feel under a great deal of pressure to bring in competitive money from outside the university. This need to constantly adapt one's research to the priorities and sensibilities of external donors not only converts scholars into fundraisers and administrators, often sucking away valuable time they could be employing in research activity; but it also compels scholars to frame and reframe their projects, so that they fit under the rubrics or priorities of this or that funding agency. Since there is no guarantee that all high-quality research will in fact be funded, this makes the university quite an insecure environment, and one that is not especially conducive to bold, risky, or unpopular research projects. Under these circumstances, the quest for truth is bound to suffer or find itself subordinated to economic imperatives.

#### 4. THE PUBLIC ROLE OF HUMANITIES SCHOLARSHIP IN THE POST-NATIONAL REGIME

If we understand humanities scholarship in Humboldtian terms, as the standard-bearer of the university's truth-seeking mission, uniquely capable of lifting the scholar and student out of the disciplinary ghettos associated with hyper-specialization, and uniquely capable of training the mind to approach reality with a sense of proportion, historical perspective, and impartiality, then this clearly has implications for what we understand to be the proper public role of the liberal arts or humanities. What contribution can humanities scholarship make to the life of a complex, post-industrialized society? It is especially important for humanities scholars themselves to ponder this question, given that plenty of other people will press upon them their preferred answers, and will not hesitate to back up their answers with appropriate financial and institutional incentives. Governments in an era of cost-cutting and privatization of public services tend to press scholarship into the service of economic production and welfare enhancement; private donors may view scholarship either as a tool for legitimating their political views or as a way to achieve certain economic and political outcomes; university administrators in an increasingly competitive global education market tend to view scholarship as a source of institutional prestige and income. What makes all of these actors especially relevant is that they control and disburse economic resources; and in the case of governments and university administrators, they also have significant regulatory power.

Of course, not all financial and administrative actors who engage with the world of education and scholarship reject the Humboldtian vision of

the university as a community of inquirers devoted to the pursuit of the truth for its own sake. But even a casual observer of the behaviour and attitudes of contemporary policy-makers and university administrators can recognize that the drive for economic utility, prestige, and the ever-elusive variable of "excellence," tends to overwhelm or obscure the Humboldtian vision.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, as many have pointed out, the relentless self-critiques of humanities scholars, many of whom have effectively discredited the very notion of truth as a legitimate object of inquiry, have also made Humboldt's and Newman's visions look archaic and, frankly, quaint in many academic circles.

It is not within the remit of this essay to launch an extended defence of the Humboldtian ideal. Instead, viewing it as an important and historically influential interpretation of what we do as humanists (one that this author believes has not been surpassed in philosophical coherence and appeal by other candidates), I wish to trace some of its implications for how we conceive the role of the university, and more particularly of humanities scholarship, in society.<sup>19</sup>

In addressing this question, my guiding star is the idea that humanities scholarship, or the liberal arts if you will, no less than the university in its corporate mission, seek out the truth about human beings and the universe in an uncompromising and disciplined way, *for its own sake*. Integral to this untrammelled quest for the truth is the cultivation of a community of inquirers trained in a set of skills and attitudes – what Newman called "the culture of the intellect" – necessary to embark responsibly on the quest. Unlike a host of institutions that study the world and the human condition for a variety of pragmatic, technological, economical, or ideological ends, the university, and pre-eminently within the university, liberal arts scholars and students, study the world and the human condition with a view to uncovering or unveiling reality, attaining a more lucid, less distorted, less self-serving picture of reality, in particular the reality of the human person.

Any harnessing of humanities scholarship to the public good must respect that truth-seeking logic internal to the liberal arts. Otherwise, it destroys the heart of humanistic research, and in doing so, it cuts out the heart of the university or converts it into something else, whether a technical college, an ideological boot camp, or a consultancy firm. If the

18 For a provocative discussion of "excellence" in higher education and its vague, catch-all quality, see Readings, *The University in Ruins*, esp. chapter two, "The Idea of Excellence."

19 For a sustained elaboration and defence of the ideal, I would refer the reader to works such as Newman's *The Idea of a University* and a book of the same title by Jaspers.

university creates a space within its walls where humanities scholarship and teaching can relentlessly pursue the truth, then the university is *already* serving an invaluable public purpose, as Humboldt, Newman, and Jaspers would insist. That is because a humane and ennobling culture requires genuine sensitivity to the higher levels of knowledge and inquiry, knowledge and inquiry about the meaning of life, about man's place in the universe, about what makes life worth living. The liberal arts at their best are precisely what cultivate this sensibility for the good, the true, and the beautiful. That is why a humane and noble culture needs institutions that protect and cultivate the "culture of the intellect" so extolled by Newman. Absent those institutional spaces, a culture may easily succumb to the downward tug toward the instrumentalization of its members to technological and economic ends, the conversion of citizenship into consumerism, and the banalization of human life. The liberal arts may serve as an invaluable bulwark against these pressures toward cultural decadence.

A skeptic may reply that the alleged ennobling effects of the liberal arts on students and scholars do not seem to have much of an impact on the wider culture beyond academia, where consumerism, individualism, and demagoguery seem, if anything, to be on the rise, not in decline. Nor have the liberal arts managed to raise the tone of the culture of academia itself, which has become progressively more individualistic and egoistic in many respects. To this objection three replies are in order: first, even if the liberal arts have a limited impact, whether on popular or academic culture, the mere fact that a society still protects spaces of truth-seeking undistorted by narrow ideological and economic ends is important and is a worthy contribution to the wider culture – much as the German universities, had they remained true to their mission, could have been one of the last havens where discourse and reflection were not co-opted by the racist and self-serving ideology of national socialism.

Second, the limited cultural impact of the liberal arts may be explained to some degree by its own neglect of its traditional mission of fostering students' moral imagination and capacity to pursue the truth wherever it leads. In many universities, the study of great literature, or indeed the notion that there is any canon of "great literature" at all, have given way to a repudiation of the authority of traditional canons and the harnessing of literary interpretation to a variety of political causes. Regardless of the merits of these causes (whether racial justice, gender equality, or some other aspect of social justice), when they assume a dominant role in the study of the liberal arts, they risk shackling the quest for truth to the political ideology of the day and putting in question the intellectual freedom and independence of students and professors alike. At that point, liberal arts programmes become just another player in the political game,

and it is much harder to see the distinctiveness of their contribution to society.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, there is probably more than a grain of truth in the criticism that humanities scholarship is too inward-looking, too indifferent to what happens beyond the walls of the academy. I agree wholeheartedly with David Shumway that, like it or not, the future of the humanities depends on a public that has more than a purely pragmatic understanding of its value. There is thus good reason to constructively engage the public beyond academic circles. Nonetheless, the reason for engaging with the societies that host and fund humanities research is not just to consolidate their support, but also to enrich the culture. Even if we had the good fortune to find ourselves in a world in which the liberal arts ideal was alive and well, or had somehow made a staggering comeback in our universities and academies, humanities scholars and departments would still have good reason to take steps to amplify their influence or penetration in the wider culture. After all, humanist scholars are also human beings and citizens, who surely have an interest in enriching the cultures they inhabit, and in acting as a counterweight to the pervasiveness of economic rationality, consumerism, and manipulative ideological discourse in democratic societies. The integrity of the university and the liberal arts is perfectly compatible, for example, with public appearances of academics on television and radio, the dissemination of philosophical and literary ideas in popular magazines and journals, arts festivals, public debates, and so forth. In short, there is no reason why humanities scholarship cannot amplify its public influence and contribution, as long as we understand this amplification precisely as the elevation and enrichment of popular culture with the spirit of rational inquiry and the uncompromising commitment to pursue the truth wherever it leads. *This* is the distinctive contribution of the liberal arts, and this is a contribution that any sensible citizen or policy-maker has good reason to value, because the spirit of rational inquiry and the commitment to truth is what stands between us and a world in which the most precious goods, including the good of rational inquiry itself, are auctioned off to the highest bidder.

20 I am not suggesting that liberal arts studies could ever be entirely neutral toward political questions. Rather, I am suggesting that the liberal arts should provide a space where students are not always "doing politics" or advancing a cause when they read a text. Politics has its own pressures of performance and efficacy, which should not be equally operative in all domains. The liberal arts can help us see the world through interpretive lenses that are not reducible to a political ideology.

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