

**And the *inferior* faculties shall inherit the Academy...: the Humanities and the future of higher education**

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As we look towards the future of higher education, what part in this for the Humanities? I argue that we must consider the importance of the Humanities in terms of higher education as a whole, and all its constituent disciplinary parts.

The title of this paper is inspired by Kant's eighteenth century writings on higher education, distinguishing between the *superior* faculties, which are directly useful to the state (Theology, Law and Medicine) and the *inferior* ones (including the Humanities) which are more distant from the State and are not perceived to have direct usefulness (Leone, 2006). The twist in Kant's analysis is that this distance is the basis for their distinct and fundamental importance across the academic sphere. It is the epistemological difference of the Humanities which, in Kant's reasoning, provides a 'check and balance' mechanism necessary to the practices of other disciplines, and hence the State itself (Leone, 2006, p. 266).

Parker (2007) provides a *manifesto for the humanities* that is a clear-eyed, unsentimental perspective on the ways in which the Humanities have failed to promote their distinctive role in higher education, along with a passionate and joyful vision of a very different future. The manifesto argues that the Humanities offer 'practices of inquiry and practices of interpretation' (124) of value to any area of enquiry in higher education. This include: dealing with 'multi-voiced and complex narratives', working with diverse 'time frames, trajectories and rhythms' and offering 'encountered, disputed, agonistic knowledge; emphasizing non closure, provisionality,

disturbance' (126). This is a rethinking of disciplinary differences at the most basic epistemological level, where the inter-relationships between the Humanities and other disciplines are inherent in the very epistemological foundations.

This is a very radical proposition. Importantly, it highlights the folly of beliefs and approaches that we can separate the 'useful' bits of the Humanities from the disciplinary domains themselves. Disciplines are complex, dynamic and contested epistemological spheres, built upon layers of knowledge engagement and subject to change and challenge.

While current perceptions that the Humanities lack robust economic usefulness are not new (see for example Birnbaum, 1975), they have been accompanied by a fierce financial redistribution. Lea (2014) suggests that justification of cuts on financial grounds have been misleading as there has been no sum cost saving as a result of the closure of Humanities departments, but rather a redistribution of funding to other areas, notably administration. Lea argues that this redistribution is essential to the marketization of higher education. Thus this is not simply economic retrenchment, but an intellectual retrenchment (Lea, 2014). I argue that to believe it possible to starve the Humanities while retaining certain aspects such as critique, rhetoric or non-linear analysis is foolhardy.

The Humanities must be justified by their contribution to the economic and social welfare of all members of society, not simply those who study the discipline (McArthur, 2011). I suggest we can make this argument in terms of three, interrelated themes:

***Vocabulary*** – the Humanities as provider of the language in which the nature of higher education can be shared, but also critiqued, challenged and transformed. In the words of novelist Toni Morrison, this is the ‘status of humanistic discourse to the creation of a civilized, shareable existence’ (Morrison, Spivak, & Awekotuku, 2005, p. 715).

***Methods*** – knowledge, whatever its ontological and epistemological foundations needs to be communicated. And communication requires interpretation. And this is the particular gift that the Humanities has to offer all other disciplines. Thus Humanities-based forms of epistemological engagement often go hand in hand with other disciplinary approaches, particularly through the interpretation and construction of knowledge requiring ‘ethical, moral, scientific, and critical acumen’ (Gilman, 2004, p. 386).

***Critical Friend*** – this resonates with the Kantian perspective, whereby it is in the less direct, less obvious link to everyday social and economic activity that the Humanities may claim particular relevance and influence. Indeed, even one of the founding fathers of neoliberal thought, economist Freidrich Hayek, decried the marginalisation of the Humanities, and did so from the perspective of their importance to specialised science. He argued for the importance of the different forms of knowledge held in literature and cultural traditions, to science. Such alternative forms of knowledge gave the scientist, or scholar, access to ‘features that are uncertain but indispensable’ (Leone, 2006, p. 271).

This is the Humanities as ‘repositories of human value, sources of moral choice, indispensable to a society that would keep (or find) its soul’ (Birnbaum, 1975, p. 11). This is not a ‘soft’ role as implied by the pernicious disciplinary distinctions of Biglan (1973). It is the epistemological robustness of the Humanities’ capacities to deal with uncertainty, multiple perspectives and matrices of human complexity that underpin its importance to the future of higher education – and most especially, the future of its relevance to wider society.

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