

Remarks on the Humanities and the Cultivation of Learners
Symposium on the Future of the Humanities
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This symposium on the future of the humanities might easily be seen as a celebration of the humanities, and in some sense it is. But the symposium is also a response to trends in higher education which suggest that the humanities curriculum, as the core of undergraduate education, might be more at risk than ever. To paraphrase the compelling invitation to this symposium from Richard Ekman and Azar Nafisi, the symposium is a response to the marginalization of the liberal arts in undergraduate education and to disquieting patterns away from the humanities in undergraduate enrollments, funding of advanced research, and trends in philanthropy.¹ This should put anyone who is serious about the importance of education to individuals, and to the societies to which they belong, in anything but a celebratory mood.

As individuals and as a society, we should be seriously concerned about the future of the humanities. This is because the study of the humanities is not a luxury, as it is too often made out to be, but a crucial ingredient in the transformation of young adults into genuine learners, by which I mean learners whose passion for learning comes from accessing their *own* questions about the facts and ideas with which they are confronted. The impact of such learning is not

¹ Invitation to the CIC, SAIS Symposium on the Future of the Humanities

limited to the undergraduate years, and has implications not just for how one makes a living but for how one lives a life. While the humanities may (and even *must*) be promoted in their own right, they must also be promoted insofar as their study converges simultaneously on individual development *and* on social well-being by cultivating learners.

For full disclosure, I offer the judgment that the humanities are crucial for making students into learners from nothing more than nearly twenty years of teaching and learning with students at St. John's College in Santa Fe, New Mexico. I say "teaching and learning" because faculty at St. John's are expected to teach and therefore to learn across a virtually all-required curriculum that includes both classes typically understood to fall within the purview of the humanities, and classes considered outside of that purview, classes in mathematics and the sciences for example. There are no departments and no majors, and so students work across the curriculum together even as faculty teach and learn outside of the specialties they have acquired in their graduate studies. The expectation is that everyone is at the college to learn together, from one another to be sure, but especially from foundational works within and outside of the humanities. This affords the St. John's faculty member a unique perspective on student learning, one which transcends departmentalization in observing the student as learner and one which

places the humanities in relief in their importance for student learning. I offer my remarks today in light of that perspective.

What I have observed is that in classes typically understood as outside the humanities, students often start out more inhibited in their attempts to ask their own questions. They come to the college having accepted that those areas of study have fixed answers and methods to which they may or may not be privy. If privy, then why ask questions? If not privy, then more study and memorization is needed, not questions that would expose ignorance of what is already known by others. Our students get past these inhibitions and do in fact find that they have questions for the likes of Euclid, Ptolemy, Newton and Einstein, as they do for Lavoisier, Maxwell and Schroedinger. And here's what I have observed about how they come to have the confidence to get past their inhibitions: they practice in the humanities. Indeed, they seem to find themselves rather quickly comfortable asking questions of Homer, Plato and Sophocles, Livy, Aquinas and Shakespeare, Descartes, Austen and Tocqueville, Nietzsche, Du Bois, and Woolfe. That is, even when young adults are faced with daunting works and big ideas in the humanities, they just can't seem to help asking their own questions. They just can't help engaging the humanities, from whatever standpoint they currently occupy. Why might this be the case, if in fact it is? Why might undergraduates—not just St. John's students, who are admittedly self-selected—be poised to find

their passion and therefore independence as learners through an encounter with the humanities?

The short answer is that the humanities are concerned with the human. By this, I mean at least two things that bear on why the study of the humanities might be vital to cultivating a passion for learning, perhaps especially at the level of undergraduate education: a) the subject matter of the humanities *is* the human in all of its myriad manifestations and implications and b) the humanities invite us to engage in learning *about* the human in the most human of ways, through the discourse of inquiry which is in some deep sense pre-methodological and therefore maximally free. For both of these reasons, the humanities lend themselves to the unique situation of young adults engaged in undergraduate education.

To begin with the subject matter of the humanities: Having experienced the alienation and fragmentation that largely characterize the adolescent experience, young adults seem to hunger after an account of the human which holds out the possibility of a sense of belonging and a wholeness that might actually be within their grasp. To encounter the human as a question, then, is to encounter something of deep importance to them. It is to encounter a field for questioning that might actually restore something they've lost or offer a path for going forward. But it is to encounter such deep and important possibilities without immediate personal risk insofar as the questions transcend the personal particularity of the inquirer even as

they expose it. This is not to say that students know self-consciously that the humanities hold out this possibility, let alone that they are motivated to study the humanities for the sake of this search or recovery. But my experience suggests that even without this self-conscious knowledge or motivation, the humanities grab them nevertheless. The humanities meet students *where* they are *as* they are, so to speak, and the practice they afford in asking one's own questions for the sake of one's own learning spills into areas where the subject matter is not so immediately accessible or personally pressing.

To go on to the approach invited by the humanities: Entering the world as free agents, many if not most of them for the first time, typical undergraduates are just finding their own voices. What they do not bring to this discovery is just as important as what they do bring. They bring with them little in the way of specialized methods of approach—which can be more constricting than liberating—but they bring much in the way of newly developing powers of analysis, critical thinking, and an openness to speculation about what was once taken for granted but which is now riddled with questions. By finding themselves free to encounter the serious, universal, and yet intimate questions posed by the humanities, armed only with what everyone else in the room has access to simply in virtue of being human and not in virtue of being learned in special methods, young adults have the greatest hope of learning to think and to question for

themselves. Whether the subject matter is a language, or a piece of literature, or a philosophical argument or theological treatise, it becomes open to student inquiry when it is presented first and foremost as a reflection on the human condition accessible through the reflection of human beings. And inquiry is the purview of all who would be learners.

By engendering learners, the humanities are crucial not only for the development of the individual but for the health of the society at large. The independent appropriation of received opinions is surely one hallmark feature of the development of the individual. The only way to appropriate received opinion for oneself is to cultivate habits of mind that allow one to look at things from a variety of perspectives and with the various human faculties freely in play—intellect, imagination, understanding and judgment. I have suggested that these habits are formed in important ways by encountering expressions of the human condition that are rich enough to engage, with one's own questions, ideas whose power is that they are simultaneously universal and particular, simultaneously able to be considered at a distance and able to be internalized in their intimate importance. I have also suggested that by being simultaneously of the most serious and important nature and yet utterly accessible, the ideas one confronts in the humanities are freeing. They free students to ask questions, to engage in conversation, to speculate—in short, they free them to participate in the most

human of activities in ways that are prior to any specialized methodological approach and the parameters they impose on our inquiry. What this means for the individual is no less than the deepening of her humanity, the maturation of her critical points of access to herself, others, and the world.

This insight into how the humanities matter for cultivating habits of mind and of discourse makes for an interesting and in some ways surprising answer to one of the many important questions we were asked to consider in preparing our remarks for this panel: How do the humanities clarify conceptions of humanity, morality, freedom, civility, and imagination? Directly, to be sure, the humanities clarify such conceptions because they bring them to light. They make thematic these conceptions in myriad ways that invite various forms of consideration, philosophical, literary, political, historical, linguistic, artistic. But indirectly, the story may be even more interesting. The humanities clarify such conceptions because they engage us in activities that embody and bring to life those conceptions. They humanize us by calling us into moral relationships with authors and with characters and with one another in our considerations of them. They humanize us by calling us into the exercise of freedom through the fundamentally important activity of questioning for ourselves. They humanize us by stripping away the divide between experts and amateurs, making the practice of civility

crucial if we are to have hope of distinguishing between true and false opinions about important questions with no simple answers.

That human beings come to their social interactions and responsibilities having thought critically about their received opinions is of inestimable importance, as is the extent to which a society values the importance of genuine learners in informing its political and social structures. It takes a learner to confront change when it presents itself, even as it takes a learner to initiate change. And change is the stuff of our existence as social beings. Whether due to natural or technological disasters, as we have so painfully witnessed in Japan, or because of political and social upheaval, as we have been watching in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya and Syria, or because of economic reversals as we have seen in our own country and throughout Europe, human beings are continually confronted by change. Our ability to meet change is intimately connected to our ability to question what it means, to understand it, to judge it, and especially to imagine what a response to it might look like given who we are and what we care about. And it is intimately connected to our ability to communicate that response through civil discourse. The humanities, then, aren't just necessary to a healthy democracy. They are perhaps even more necessary to a democracy in a state of ill health, one fragmented and fractured. How much more necessary are they in societies that don't even yet have the structures in place to make civil discourse possible?

In calling to consciousness the ways in which the humanities are vital to the cultivation of learners and therefore to the development of the individual and the health of society, I in no way mean to suggest that the humanities are all that should be taught or that approached naively they alone can prepare our students for the future. The sciences and the social sciences, technical and vocational schools, and the myriad specialized approaches to the humanities that frankly constitute much of the educational experience of those of us in this room all have a place in developing individuals and in helping them to take their place in society. But I would argue that for every one of these approaches to education the student who has been introduced to the humanities and allowed to explore them as openly as possible will excel. Never mind that such a student also has the best hope to enjoy the unique pleasures that come through the study of the humanities. Perhaps that is a luxury of a sort, though one I wish for every human being on the planet. But it is hardly a luxury to explore one's humanity and to exercise it; it should hardly be a luxury to be afforded the opportunity to become a learner, to think and to question for oneself.

If the humanities are at risk, it may be in part the fault of those of us who teach the humanities. Perhaps we have become a little too anxious to dress up the humanities to look like the sciences, focused as they are on specialized methods. Perhaps we have gotten too caught up in passing on those methods and the views

they support when in fact the point of contact between our students and the works to which we introduce them is simpler and more straightforward—a matter simply and straightforwardly of encountering the human humanly. If this is true, and we are willing to stand up for the humanities not just as goods in themselves but as the vital ingredient they are in the cultivation of learners, then the risk to the future of the humanities may be reversed. Would that enrollments, funding, and trends in philanthropy might follow our lead. In a very real sense, *our* future depends on it.