

Steven Knapp
Office of the President
The George Washington University
2121 Eye Street NW
Washington, DC 20052

The Enduring Dilemma of the Humanities

For Session I: Why the Humanities?

Symposium on the Future of the Humanities
Kenney Auditorium
The Johns Hopkins University Paul H. Nitze
School of Advanced International Affairs
March 29, 2011
9:00-10:30 a.m.

Needless to say, it's an honor to follow Neil Rudenstine. I'm deeply grateful to Azar Nafisi and Richard Ekman for inviting me to participate in this important symposium.

My focus this morning will be on the first and third of the questions posed for this panel in the program:

- Why does interest in the humanities rise and fall over time? And,
- Why don't the humanities remain consistent reference points in academia and beyond?

I think the answers to these two questions are closely related, and in fact involve what Neil Rudenstine has effectively identified as the broadest as well as the deepest source of attraction to the phenomena that the

humanities profess to study: namely, the pleasure human beings take in the particularity of lived experience – or as I would go further and say, the pleasure human beings take in preserving and enjoying particular things.

In a fascinating new book entitled *How Pleasure Works*,¹ Yale psychologist Paul Bloom summarizes the results of a large number of recent studies by cognitive scientists of precisely this phenomenon. Bloom starts with the question of why we value original artworks more than we value forgeries, no matter how perfect the latter may be. His initial example is the outrage that Nazi war criminal Hermann Goering experienced, even while awaiting execution, upon the discovery that a Vermeer masterpiece he thought he had in effect stolen from Holland was in fact a forgery, perpetrated by the brilliant art collector and Vermeer forger Han van Meergen. (Van Meergen was himself facing execution for selling this national treasure to the Nazis and only saved himself by painting another “Vermeer” in front of numerous witnesses, thereby proving that the masterpiece, *Christ with the Woman Taken in Adultery*, was a fake.)² Why, Bloom asks, should we care so much about the *origin* of a forged work of art if the aesthetic features of that forgery are, as far as we can tell, just as good as those of an unforged original?

¹ Paul Bloom, *How Pleasure Works: the New Science of Why We Like What We Like* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2010).

² Bloom, pp. 1-2.

It turns out that the origin of an object makes a profound difference to human beings, and according to Bloom, that difference is built into the way we relate to the objects around us. Bloom regards this human disposition as a kind of innate essentialism in the human psyche: we automatically and involuntarily see objects as connected with their histories in ways that transcend their physical and aesthetic properties. That's why it matters to us whether an image was created on purpose or by accident, and that's why we care more about what a picture was *intended* to represent than we care about what it actually looks like. Hence Bloom reports on "a series of studies that found that even three-year-olds would name their pictures based on what they were intending when they created it." One investigator found that "even 24-month-olds are sensitive to a drawing's history when deciding what to call it."³

What these studies point to, it seems to me, is the inseparability of our notion of particularity from our notion of history. What differentiates one object from another, from the point of view of human interest and value, is not what it looks like but where it came from, how it came to be, what it was intended to do or mean. That's why there is something profoundly unsatisfying about the idea of replacing a lost wedding ring or a lost childhood toy with an exact duplicate – let alone replacing a beloved person

³ Bloom, p. 139.

with his or her exact clone, a proposition frequently explored in science fiction precisely because it is so disturbing.

I would like to suggest that an investment in their particularity and therefore in their history is what most deeply and importantly separates the objects and events studied by the humanities from the phenomena studied by the natural and even the social sciences. In science, what matters is not the irreplaceable particularity, the irreplaceable origin, of the phenomenon in question but instead its generalizability and therefore precisely the replaceability of its particular history.

Now at the same time, of course, the aim of humanities *scholarship* is not simply to observe and record particular histories. Particular histories have features in common that support the construction of general explanations. That is true of broad social changes, and equally true of the intentions imbedded in each particular work of art. Every particular intention is also a *kind* of intention; that's why a child can learn what it means to intend to draw, say, a picture of a horse. At least part of the aim of humanities scholarship is to generate knowledge that, like scientific knowledge, can be confirmed or criticized by others and, in the strongest and most influential cases, can give rise to powerful general explanations that transcend particular cases; that's what distinguishes scholars of the humanities from the artists and historical agents they study, and it is what

gives humanities scholars at least a measure of the academic prestige accorded to scientists.

Generalization is also what gives humanities scholarship whatever social utility it can claim: for instance, its professed ability to illuminate the interaction of different cultures; to foster certain values; to criticize traditional assumptions; and so on.

But therein lies the source of what I am calling the humanities' enduring dilemma: the further humanities scholars go in building general explanations, the further they depart from the original source of our interest in the objects and events they study. What this means, among other things, is that the academic prestige of work in the humanities is inherently in tension – some might even go so far as to suggest, inherently incompatible – with the social and cultural prestige such work derives from our interest in the humanities' objects of study.

Defenders of scholarship in the humanities sometimes think the way to give it a social standing and public support equivalent to that of the sciences is to defend either the rigor and objectivity of its research or the social relevance and utility of its implications. In fact, however, what the public values in the humanities is their relation to the particular power, prestige, and interest of the objects of humanities inquiry – not, I regret to say, the more general benefits allegedly derived from such inquiry itself. What

matters to the public is Shakespeare, not the logic of theatrical representation. What matters is the story of America, not the ideological structure of American exceptionalism. What matters – again, to the public – is the experience of entering another world that one can have by reading a novel like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*; not, or at least not primarily, whatever light this experience may shed on the social mechanisms of colonialism.

In short, while all scholarship risks controversy – just think of what has happened to scientists interested in climate change – humanities scholarship is *inherently* controversial in ways that don't as readily or pervasively apply to other disciplines. This inherently controversial status is quite independent of whatever "culture wars" may be occurring in any given decade; that's why the dilemma I am describing is an enduring and, I would contend, ultimately irresolvable one.

Because, in my view, the humanities cannot escape this problem, the best approach is, and has always been, to embrace it and make the best of it. But how?

Well, decades ago, that kind of *modus vivendi* could be achieved by strongly connecting the professional academic pursuit of advanced humanities scholarship to the teaching of undergraduates; the unspoken assumption was that parents wanted their children to have contact with the

prestigious histories imbedded both in classic works of literature and other arts and in the emergence of the modern world. Perhaps the most brilliant example of that strategy, at least in the Anglo-American context, was the invention of the so-called New Criticism. For those who were never exposed to it or have since forgotten it, this was a set of techniques for generating close readings of just about any kind of text, although the objects to which it was mainly applied were shorter works – mostly poems – from the canon of English literature. By looking for certain kinds of paradoxes in a poem's rhetorical structure, one could generate a seemingly endless series of rich and unexpected interpretations. Because they were unexpected and in that sense apparently original, these readings were eminently publishable, so they helped fuel an explosion of academic publishing and formed the basis of countless academic careers. And because the technique itself was so eminently *teachable*, it enabled countless students with little or no background in literary history to produce extraordinarily sophisticated critical papers that made them seem astonishingly learned and cultured, to themselves and others. (I mean that statement less ironically than it may sound.)

The assumptions that underlay the success of the New Criticism long ago faded, I believe for two main reasons: first, because humanities scholarship, under the influence of feminism, Marxism, anticolonialism, and

deconstruction, took a critical turn *against* culturally prestigious objects; second, because a variety of factors have turned the interest of students and those who pay for their education in more utilitarian directions.

What now? One possibility is that humanities scholarship will continue to shrink into a specialized explanatory enterprise with no particular claim to social utility or broad public support, not dissimilar perhaps to analytic philosophy (a discipline I very much respect). Another possibility is a return to the kind of commentary on particular objects and their histories that would be seen as enhancing rather than abandoning or undermining an interest in those particularities and therefore giving people a source of pleasure and interest they would rather not do without. For awhile, it looked like the so-called New Historicism, championed by Berkeley Shakespearean (now Harvard Shakespearean) Stephen Greenblatt and his fellow editors of the journal *Representations*, would fit that bill. From one point of view, New Historicism was essentially an expansion of New Criticism to incorporate the insights and criticisms of feminism, Marxism, anticolonialism, and deconstruction. The result was a kind of reading that applied the techniques of New Criticism not only to a canonical text but simultaneously to that text's cultural and historical context. For instance, in commenting on a classic text like Shakespeare's *Macbeth* – a favorite object of New Critical commentary because of its dense metaphorical texture – a New Historicist would also look

at the debates about witchcraft that took place in Shakespeare's England and were plausibly reflected in his treatment of the three witches in *Macbeth*.⁴

The one thing of which we can be certain is that, whatever direction work in the humanities next takes, it will only be a matter of time until the academic prestige and broader social standing of the humanities once again either converge or diverge, in ways we can't predict.

I submit that those who care about the humanities should resign themselves to this inherent difficulty and continue pursuing, on one hand, the pleasure they take in art and history, and on the other hand, the curiosity that leads them to analyze and explain – without either demanding or expecting a stable reconciliation of the two.

⁴ Stephen Greenblatt, "Shakespeare Bewitched," in *New Historical Literary Study: Essays on Reproducing Texts, Representing History*, ed. Jeffrey N. Cox and Larry J. Reynolds (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 108-135.