Joe Moran

To the Anxious Humanities Scholar

You are a humanities scholar and you are worried. You fear that the humanities are increasingly seen as irrelevant, unnecessary and quaint. You may even have begun to internalise this view. In the face of intractable contemporary problems – global pandemics, economic crisis and a climate emergency – how can your work seem like anything other than an indulgence?

You hear the constant, ambient noise of public and political hostility aimed at what you do. In January 2020 the prime minister's chief adviser, Dominic Cummings (a humanities graduate, like the prime minister), wrote a long blog post calling for 'weirdos and misfits with odd skills' to apply for new jobs at No. 10 Downing Street. He made it clear that he was looking for data scientists, software developers, economists and policy experts, not 'Oxbridge English graduates who chat about Lacan at dinner parties with TV producers'.[1] Later that month the University of Sunderland announced that it would be shutting down its history, languages and politics courses, and replacing them with more 'career-focused and professions-facing' alternatives. In February the University of Portsmouth revealed plans to make more than half its English department redundant, citing the declining number of applications in this subject. In June 2020 the Australian education minister, Dan Tehan, announced that his government wanted to double student fees for courses in the arts and humanities while cutting them for nursing, agriculture, maths, science and information technology. The aim was 'to power our post-Covid economic recovery' by sending out a 'price signal' to encourage people to study in areas of growth.[2] The UK government made similar noises about pricing mechanisms and ending funding for humanities courses considered poor value for money.

In August 2020 the A-level marking controversy, and the subsequent scramble for university places, inspired much media comment about the glut of worthless degrees in second-rate institutions, again focusing on humanities subjects. 'The universities are churning out far more graduates than our society requires,' wrote one columnist, 'particularly in subjects like the creative arts and communications that have little

relevance to the workplace.'[3] The current right-wing critique of universities as indoctrination camps where students are 'factory-farmed to have the same boring and malevolent views' has focused its ire on humanities subjects.[4]

No wonder that, after reading these signs and portents, you feel beleaguered and dispirited. You crave some encouragement and cheer, and a reminder of why you first fell in love with the texts you spend your life examining. You need a story that will convince others, and yourself, of the worth of your work.

The Humanities and the Real World

You may take heart from the knowledge that, while this particular crisis is new, the issues are old. 'The humanities are at the cross-roads, at a crisis in their existence,' the historian J.H. Plumb wrote in the introduction to his Pelican edited collection, *Crisis in the Humanities*, in 1964. 'They must either change the image that they present, adapt themselves to the needs of a society dominated by science and technology, or retreat into social triviality.'[5]

This permanent crisis of identity and legitimacy in the humanities arises partly out of definitional fuzziness. The humanities have often been defined against something else – and against which they can be found wanting. In the Renaissance the *studia humanitatis* were the secular subjects, such as rhetoric, philosophy and ancient Greek and Latin, and thus the opposite of the highest form of study, divinity. Then, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the humanities began to be defined in opposition to the physical sciences. At first they were the senior partner. Charles Darwin's frequent biblical and literary allusions, and the elegance of his own writing, show how influenced he was by the humanities. But in the century after Darwin's death, the sciences grew in confidence and prestige. The main character in Saul Bellow's 1987 novel *More Die of Heartbreak*, a Russian literature specialist, feels as if he has been confined to 'the nursery games of humankind, which had to be left behind when the age of science began'. The humanities, he thinks gloomily, 'would be called upon to choose a wallpaper for the crypt, as the end drew near'.[6]

More recently, the humanities have come to seem like the poor relation of STEM. STEM is an acronym now routinely repurposed as both noun and adjective (STEM skills, STEM subjects, STEM jobs). We forget how new the acronym is and sometimes even what it stands for (science, technology, engineering and mathematics). The *OED* gives its earliest mention in print as 1968 but notes that it is 'rare before 21st cent.' In

fact it began to be used widely in the US in the late 1990s, in debates about skills shortages in high-tech jobs and access to work visas for immigrants skilled in these fields. In Britain it has become an article of faith among policy makers that investing in STEM is vital to economic growth, especially in areas like life sciences, pharmaceuticals, computer coding and electronic engineering.

The embattled scholar of the humanities may be tempted to lash out defensively at this more glamorous sibling, STEM, who gets all the attention and praise. In 2010 a novelist and creative writing lecturer complained that 'the humanities are being killed off […] The scientists are winning […] The purpose of artists is to ask the right questions, even if we don't find the answers, whereas the aim of science is to prove some dumb point.'[7] Apart from letting off steam, such statements don't help much. We need a defence of the humanities that resists this tired trope of the sciences as mechanical and dehumanising. It must begin with a recognition that the humanities and sciences are of equal and incommensurable value.

Part of what the humanities do is to explore how arguments are limited not by being 'wrong', but by being framed so as to make other arguments unhearable. Behind the invoking of STEM as an urgent priority lie several unexamined assumptions – none of which is necessarily false, but all of which are a story being told about the world. The first is that we are competing with other countries in a 'skills race' and we are falling behind. The second is that the sciences and humanities are engaged in a zero-sum game of competitive usefulness: if STEM is essential, then other subjects must be less essential. The third is that a university is not part of 'the real world', but a way of preparing students for that world. Its intellectual currency has value only if it can be converted into something usable elsewhere. Governments now insist on university courses providing value for money, with graduate salaries being the main assessment criterion. Measurable inputs (teaching hours, tuition fees) must be matched with measurable outputs (jobs, increased salaries).

Steven Shapin sheds light on this transactional idea of the university by tracing the history of a phrase, 'the Ivory Tower'. The Ivory Tower never existed. It was only ever a figure of speech, a way of signalling lofty detachment from the world, because ivory was so costly that its main use was for art or religious iconography. The Ivory Tower began as a religious metaphor, until nineteenth-century writers adapted it to refer to the art world. Only in the second part of the twentieth century did universities begin to be called Ivory Towers. University scientists were increasingly doing applied research, contributing to the

manufacture of drugs, weapons, herbicides and synthetic fibres. Those scholars still doing non-applied research began to be accused of hiding in Ivory Towers. By the 1970s the Ivory Tower was judged to be 'an almost incontestably Bad Place', one where elites retreated behind high walls.[8]

In the UK, the Ivory Tower emerged as a metaphor just as universities became less cloistered and more engaged with the world. Before the Second World War, when a tiny proportion of the population attended a few universities or university colleges, dons had a comfortable but peripheral role in national life. In 1939 Britain had only 5,000 academics. By the end of the 1960s, with the arrival of the plate-glass universities, the polytechnics and the Open University, the number had risen to 40,000.[9] In a process that A. H. Halsey calls 'the decline of donnish dominion', universities ceased to be self-governing scholarly guilds and became subject to external control over their teaching and research, mainly through more organised competition for funding. They were now habitually criticised for being detached from the 'real world'.

The American poet Richard Hugo worked for thirteen years as a technical writer for Boeing before teaching English and creative writing at the University of Montana in Missoula. 'I hate that phrase "the real world",' he writes in *The Triggering Town* (1979). 'Why is an aircraft factory more real than a university? Is it?' Hugo pointed out that in his office on campus he had had intense conversations with ex-convicts on parole, people recently released from mental hospitals, drug addicts and young people in great emotional distress. 'In some ways,' he writes, 'the university is a far more real world than business.'[10]

The belief that universities need to prepare students for a 'real world' of which they are not part is itself an example of what the humanities explore: the human capacity to make meaning. The humanities study the meaning-making creations of humanity: art, music, literature, language, religion, history and philosophy. But their broader concern is this compulsion to make meaning out of our lives. They study, in its largest sense, storytelling – that borderless coin with which all humans trade.

Storytelling happens everywhere, including within academic disciplines. Economics, for instance, has long considered itself the queen of the social sciences – that is, the most scientific. And yet rival economists persist in telling very different stories about how the world works. In recent decades, economics has been dominated by the story that we are *homo economicus*: little autonomous bundles of self-interest and rational choice. This story has proved inadequate as a way of understanding

the world after the 2008 financial crash. The crash was sparked by the failure of mathematical models which turned out to be stories that humans were telling themselves about how the world worked. The crash confirmed that the economy is in part an imaginative entity, a product of unmodellable phenomena such as groupthink, faddishness and market confidence. In the age of Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies, it should be clearer than ever that money is a human abstraction, a stand-in for value rather than value itself, a story we agree amongst ourselves – at least until we lose faith in it, and see how scarily it is built on the shifting sands of mass belief.

The economist Yannis Varoufakis has credited Shakespeare with teaching him the folly of rational choice theory and of his fellow economists' belief that they were the scientists of society. Shakespearean characters, he found, were complex and conflicted, not reducible to a 'calculus of utility, passion, preference or desire'. Shakespeare's tragedies taught him that oppressors and exploiters often become 'enslaved by their own insecurity, paranoia and, in the end, induced incompetence'. Seemingly rational systems like capitalism can 'enslav[e] everyone, rich and poor, capitalist and worker, wasting human and natural resources'.[11]

Much of human reality is intersubjective – a product of collective meaning-making. The humanities, Yuhal Noah Harari writes, 'emphasise the crucial importance of intersubjective entities, which cannot be reduced to hormones and neurons'.[12] The success of the human species, Harari argues, comes from our ability to weave these intersubjective webs of meaning, made up of languages, laws, religions, customs, rituals, nations and identities. The price we pay for this ability is that these same fictions become self-validating and erase other realities. Immersed as we are in their symbolic universes, we cannot break their spell of meaning. We mistake their intersubjective abstractions for concrete, incontestable truths. As Harari points out, emerging technologies are likely to make such collective fictions even more powerful. Biotechnology – such as xenotransplantation, gene therapy and genome modification – will force us to think about where the human begins and ends. Physical geography will coexist more and more with human-made cyberspace and virtual worlds. Data science will imagine humans as having meaning and value mainly as part of the data flow. New technologies are changing the stories we tell about ourselves.

The humanities show us how to read these stories with imaginative sympathy and watchful scepticism, by teasing out the assumptions underneath. What does it mean to be human in a techno-humanist age, and is it healthy to believe that we can transcend our evolutionary past

as weak, dependent, mortal animals? What is economic growth for, and has it become an end in itself rather than a means to an end? Why is work held up as a moral good? What is the 'real world' and why must we bend to its immovable certainties? How do we live a good, meaningful life?

Science and the Humanities

In a more than sixty-year career, the American biologist Edward O. Wilson has been a great evangelist for science. And yet in *The Meaning of Human Existence* (2014) he claims that, if the earth were ever visited by aliens, our species would have one thing worthy of their attention: the humanities. Science, he argues, derives general laws from reproducible experiments. Its truths thus apply everywhere in the universe, regardless of who discovered them. Aliens who have arrived from millions of light years away may be scientifically millions of years ahead of us, in which case our scientists would not be able to tell them much they don't know already.[13] What would intrigue these hyper-evolved aliens is the humanities, 'the natural history of culture, and our most private and precious heritage'. The sword of science, Wilson writes, 'cuts paths through the fever swamp of human existence'.[14] The humanities do the opposite. They explore how we live in that swamp and extract meaning from its muddy, mosquito-ridden and stagnant water. They study human culture in all its intricacy and idiosyncrasy.

Science searches for useful simplifications that reduce complex phenomena to fundamental principles. It breaks up the multifaceted world into its constituent parts – brains into neurons, neurons into molecules, molecules into atoms. Then it isolates and examines them separately to devise helpful explanations. Once science understood that the basic unit of life, the gene, is a macro-molecule, deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA), for instance, it could start to explain life's mysteries through the simpler laws of chemistry. Science is sometimes accused of being 'reductionist' – often by humanities scholars, for whom a reductive interpretation of a text is one that collapses its complexity into a false simplicity. But in science, reductionism is all. Science explains by excluding from its remit things which are just as much part of reality but not essential to that particular explanation. Scientists don't deny the existence of this more complex reality; they just clear it away, for now, so that some general rule can be revealed. Science pares down with Occam's razor until it finds its own kind of truth. Hence the quest for the beautiful economy of an equation – the formula that will explain a lot with as little effort as possible.

Science, not the humanities, is the realm of beauty. Whatever Bellow's hero feared, the humanities will never be decorative wallpaper, because there is nothing especially decorative about them. The art, music, writing and thought they examine may well be beautiful. But if you're looking for beauty *per se*, you'd be better off studying number theory. A pure mathematician will tell you that what really excites them is the search for a beautiful proof: perfectly balanced, sparely elegant, thrillingly inevitable, free of all flab and excrescence. Theoretical physicists also tend to believe that the first requirement of an equation is that it be beautiful. For them, natural symmetry and honed brevity are the straightest road to scientific truth, the formula most likely to stand up to experimental validation.[15]

You can get that kind of mathematical perfection from a Bach cantata, I suppose, music being the art form most like mathematics. But more often, the texts we study in the humanities are as cross-grained, richly woven and fascinatingly flawed as the humans who made them. Martha Nussbaum argues that, just as athletic achievement 'has point and value only relatively to the context of the human body', so other human achievements are inevitably measured against our built-in constraints. 'Human limits structure the human excellences, and give excellent action its significance,' she writes.[16] The humanities explore the work not of divinely inspired demigods, but of human beings working within their human limits. Like Usain Bolt running 100 metres in 9.58 seconds, these artefacts feel like virtuosic but imperfect achievements.

Humanities scholars also work within these human limits. Only a small amount of our work can be roboticised or technologically enhanced. To study human artefacts, we use human skills: looking, listening, speaking, reading and writing. This makes the humanities harder to justify to those who think that universities should prepare us for the 'real world', because they draw on accessible aptitudes that are already part of that world. Most people can look, listen, speak, read and write. But in the humanities we learn that these skills are more complex and difficult than we think.

Words today are cheaply available. The technology of mobile devices and online interactivity has invaded almost every public and private space with our declarations and revelations. A pervasive techno-libertarian ethos supposes it healthy and cathartic for us to be forever sharing our thoughts with the world. If you time-travelled even just thirty years into the past, you would be struck by how little writing was happening outside of the classroom. There would be no one sat in coffee shops stabbing their laptops urgently with two fingers; no

students texting slyly in class under their desks; no one updating the social network with news of their lives. Writing then was mostly outsourced to professionals and meant to be read much later than it was written. Nowadays most writing is for rapid release and response, a slightly interrupted way of having a conversation.

Jodi Dean uses the term 'communicative capitalism' to describe this new world in which the main commodity is messages constantly circulating.[17] The specific sender or receiver of a message is less important than its contribution to the data flow. Its use value is secondary to its exchange value as part of the ever-expanding pool of information. Every message becomes 'content', the abstract, uncountable noun that refers to anything uploaded onto a platform that can be shared across that and other platforms. Advertising-revenue-driven algorithms push the most shareable (and often the noisiest and most shocking) content. In *The World of Silence* (1948), the Swiss theologian Max Picard writes of noise as this kind of endless onward flow, its only demand being that it should go on uninterrupted. 'Words have become merely signs that something is being fetched out of the jumble of noise and thrown at the listener,' he argues. '[…] The noise never dares to stop – as if it were afraid that it might disappear if it were not always to be occupying the whole of space.'[18]

As words proliferate, they are used more profligately. Communicative capitalism has little interest in the rhetorical power of language, its ability to reshape reality and change how we think. Words are seen only as a transparent conduit for thought. A politician, caught out saying something unguarded, apologises for their 'poor choice of words' – as though words were just a light dusting of salt on the meat of meaning, and not that important. The humanities scholar knows that words are not a condiment but the marinade that alters the taste of everything. They know that the world is created partly through words. This teaches them to be sceptical of current iterations of reality and tolerant of other perspectives. If life can be differently articulated, it can be differently lived.

We have come to think of reading as a mere competency, a matter of just scanning a text and computing the words. To take something 'as read' means to assume something without further discussion. And yet in its first sense the Old English *rædan* meant to advise, deliberate or consider. *Unready*, the epithet of Ethelred II, meant poorly advised, lacking good counsel. The humanities see reading as, in Julian Barnes's phrase, 'a majority skill but a minority art'.[19] To read in the humanities means to come up with our own exact and singular reading of a text. Since every reading is unique, it can never be a definitive statement,

but must be inspired by and feed into other readings, and be prepared to inspire its own.

In the humanities there is a theoretically limitless number of readings. Science's insights stem, by contrast, from its self-limitations. It confines itself to aspects of the mechanical or biological world that can be clearly established, or at least that can be the subject of falsifiable theories. It tries to eliminate human subjectivity from its calculations, in search of what Karl Popper called *'knowledge without a knower'*.[20] Take one great early scientific discovery: Johannes Kepler's first law of planetary motion which, along with Galileo's work, began to create an alternative physics to that of Aristotle and Ptolemy. Kepler wasted a great deal of time trying to reconcile his mentor Tycho Brahe's observations of Mars with a circular orbit. Like everyone else, he did not find the idea that planets move in ellipses aesthetically agreeable. He clung to the story of circular orbits.

The accuracy of Tycho's astronomical measurements forced Kepler to abandon the 'divine' conception of the circle and consider the 'ugly' ellipse. Ptolemy's model of the universe had satisfied the human desire for neat circularity, but the universe was not so obliging. Kepler had to confront his human biases with the non-human evidence. To know scientifically, he wrote, is to 'shak[e] off the deceptions of eyesight'.[21] His 1605 proof that the orbit of Mars is an ellipse demonstrated the power of scientific abstraction: it relied entirely on Euclid's geometry of straight lines and circles. Kepler had reduced the movement of the spheres to a mathematical calculation.

Compare Kepler's work with that of a slightly earlier figure: the polymath John Dee. Perhaps the most widely read man of his time, he had one of the largest libraries in sixteenth-century England. He was an expert in Copernican astronomy, Euclidean geometry and cartography. But he also believed in astrology, alchemy and crystallomancy, and in the possibility of summoning angels through seances, mirrors and occult codes. For all his brilliance and erudition, Dee left behind no great scientific discovery, because he had neither the talent nor inclination for reductionism. His life and work are now mainly of interest to humanities scholars exploring the intellectual and cultural history of the early modern era.

The scientific method, with its objective standards of evidence and reduction to first principles, has immense explanatory power. It feels especially worth defending today, when so much public discourse resorts to ad hominem arguments and dismisses evidence and expertise. Online discussion often deteriorates into abuse because people take being challenged so personally. Arguments feel like emotional investments and

critique like an attack. Science teaches us detachment, how to separate reality from our own beliefs and desires. 'Of course we see in a glass darkly,' as the economist J.R. Sargent put it, 'but at least we should stop it getting it clouded by our breath.'[22]

The humanities aspire to a different kind of rigour. They can never erase the human from their calculations, because they study the whole chaotic business of human meaning-making. They can't reduce things to their essentials as science does, because they examine artefacts that are all unique, having each emerged from the most complex object in the known universe, the human brain. The American poet Donald Hall defines a poem as 'human inside talking to human inside'.[23] The same might be said of any text or artefact studied in the humanities. Since human inside can't literally talk to human inside, every attempt to do so will be a uniquely intriguing failure.

Artificial intelligence has already begun to exceed the basic computing power of the human brain. But it has come nowhere near to replicating the brain's anarchic non-computability, the human gift for being both brilliantly stupid and stupidly brilliant all at once. Adam Gopnik calls it 'standard-issue human perversity'.[24] The humanities deal with this muddled, contradictory, non-abstractable state of being human.

Humanities research now often takes place in 'labs': arts labs, literature labs, history labs. This linguistic borrowing from the ascendant sciences is meant to make humanities scholarship sound purposeful, methodical and busy. It has a long pedigree. 'When a professor of history calls his "seminar" a "laboratory", is he not wilfully expatriating himself from his natural environment?' asked Arnold Toynbee in *A Study of History* (1934). The historian's seminarium, for Toynbee, was not a laboratory but 'a nursery-garden in which living ideas about living creatures are taught to shoot'.[25]

Calling any place of humanities research a 'lab' may be a useful branding exercise, but it is a category error that betrays a loss of confidence about what the humanities do. Science needs laboratories, because it proceeds by doing experiments under controlled conditions. These laboratory conditions remove the distorting signal of human subjectivity and other unreproducible factors that might affect the results. The humanities don't distil and purify in this way; they translate, interpret and explain. Instead of abstracting and universalising, they enrich and particularise. In the humanities, explanations and examples multiply because the human conversation about what our lives mean never ends. Instead of a laboratory, a humanities scholar needs a library. They know that somewhere in those miles of bookshelves, either physical or virtual, lies the answer, or the question, they are seeking – albeit framed

differently, in another place and time, by someone trying to make their own sense of being human.

Every humanities scholar, whatever their discipline or period, is a historian of human culture. One of their tasks is to unearth the rich archive of human contingency in a way that undermines the trite generalities and misleading myths of lazier forms of public memory. The humanities scholar knows that the past is too complex and *sui generis* for us to draw facile parallels with the present. Hitler's appeasers tell us little about how to behave towards Islamic terrorists; the Hundred Years' War offers no easy insights into our current relationship with Europe; the history of the British Empire gives us few clues as to what life will be like after Brexit. Instead the humanities scholar uses the past to make us aware of possibilities we have not considered, and other ways to live that we have forgotten. 'The past is full not of dead things but of unfinished business: germs of fruitful routes as yet untravelled,' David Gange argues. 'Every coastal ruin whose living cultures were once steamrollered by the homogenising logics of industrial capitalism is a site at which the possibilities for an escape from those logics can be entertained.'[26]

By preserving and curating past human cultures, the humanities serve as an antidote to the hubris of presentism. One example of such presentism is how often policy makers use medieval history as an illustration of the irrelevance of the humanities to the modern world. In May 2003 the education secretary, Charles Clarke, claimed to have been misquoted when he was reported to have told an audience at University College Worcester: 'I don't mind there being some medievalists around for ornamental purposes. But there is no reason for the state to pay for them.' Clarke said that he had referred only to an old-fashioned view of the university as 'the medieval concept of a community of scholars seeking truth'. He argued that this was a poor rationale for requesting state support.[27]

In May 2016 Patrick Johnston, vice-chancellor of Queen's University Belfast, was not so nuanced when he told the *Belfast Telegraph*: 'Society doesn't need a 21-year-old who is a sixth-century historian.' It needed, he said, 'someone who has the potential to help society drive forward'.[28] In January 2018 the MP Robert Halfon, chair of the Commons select committee on education, called for discounted student fees for degrees in subjects that addressed skills shortages in healthcare, construction, engineering or digital industries where 'we are way behind'. 'If someone wants to do medieval history, that's fine,' Halfon said. 'But all the incentives from government and so on should go to areas the country needs and will bring it most benefit.'[29]

It helps these arguments that the word 'medieval' itself connotes a risible primitivism. When Donald Trump declared in his 2016 election campaign that 'waterboarding is absolutely fine but we should go much further', he explained that 'we're living in medieval times' and were fighting 'violent people, vicious people'.[30] Trump's words feed into long associations of medieval society with irrationalism and barbarism – a rhetoric used most recently against Al-Qaida and Islamic State.

Medieval historians have challenged this polarised view that sets the dark ages against enlightened modernity. Rory Cox argues that in the medieval era what we now call 'waterboarding' was thought worse than other forms of torture such as flogging and the leg screw. Cox finds references to waterboard-like torture – pouring water over the face of the supine victim and using a cloth to stuff the mouth and nostrils, to induce the sensation of drowning – in European legal treatises from the late fourteenth century onwards. It was viewed as a severe torture technique, and jurists, city states and kingdoms only sanctioned torture in extreme cases anyway. Cox's account challenges the idea of torture as something that medieval barbarians indulged in for sadistic reasons, and questions the post-9/11 reframing of waterboarding as 'torture lite'.[31] It is a model of how the humanities can address the fallacies of presentism.

Most of us suffer to some degree from this condescension towards the past, the unthinking assumption that our ancestors were naïve and backward compared to us. 'The modern mind longs for the future as the medieval mind longed for Heaven,' writes Wendell Berry in *The Unsettling of America*. What Berry calls this 'strange, almost occult yearning for the future'[32] is evident in the current phrase 'going forward' (or its now more common and vigorous variants, 'moving forward' and 'driving forward'). The language of managerialism is one of perpetual movement: of *change management*, *continuous enhancement*, *action points* and *direction of travel*. It calls to mind the French theorist Henri Lefebvre's definition of modernisation as 'the movement which justifies its own existence merely by moving'.[33]

The humanities scholar knows that we are neither so wise nor so radical as this, and that most things have been thought before. They propose that, rather than move blindly into the future, we draw on that vast human heritage of creative insight – not so much to check that we are moving in the right direction as to clarify that there is no single, clean line into the future. Science moves forward, proceeding by increments along its cutting edge; but the humanities are cumulative, not linear. By telling stories to interpret other stories, and analysing words by using more words, they pursue illuminating complication rather than science's beautiful simplicity. They layer on meaning and

erudition, enlarging bit by bit on the conversation begun tens of thousands of years ago when Homo sapiens went deep into caves to blow ochre dye on the walls.

The Humanities and the Human

This long search for meaning in human life is heroic because it is so at war with the scientific evidence. Science, quite rightly from a scientific viewpoint, says that human beings don't much matter. What does a single human life amount to in the context of a 13.8-billion-year-old universe, which contains dozens of galaxies (at least) for every one of the nearly 8 billion people alive? Humanness to a scientist is a matter of degree, because it arrived piecemeal, via evolution, over huge tranches of time. Palaeoanthropology demonstrates how fuzzy is the line in the fossil record that separates Homo sapiens from other hominids or Australopithecines. Now that we know that Neanderthals cared for sick and disabled members of their tribe, mourned their dead and had larger brains than ours, and now that the genome record has revealed Neanderthal DNA in Homo sapiens, we must revise our sense of our own specialness. To label someone boorish and uncivilised as 'Neanderthal' is yet more presentism.

Primatology shows us that apes are like us, except for relatively minor modifications like erect bipedalism and greater cranial capacity. Ethology shows us that other animals have behaviour patterns that might seem as sophisticated as our own were we to understand them fully. A migratory bird has an internal guidance system more subtle than satnav, and a pair of whooping cranes has, in the words of the ecocritic Joseph Meeker, 'a courtship and sex life at least as complicated as Romeo and Juliet's'.[34] Neuroscience shows us that everything that comprises the essential human self – mind, soul, personality, spirit – is housed in that hunk of animal matter, a brain. The emerging fields of biotechnology and artificial intelligence show us that our idea of the human may soon incorporate the robotic and the algorithmic. Science has established that all the walls we have built between ourselves and other animals to prove our uniqueness – comprised of qualities like emotion, culture, language and play – are porous and permeable.

To a scientist we are worth no more or less than other forms of life. We are loose arrangements of carbon-based matter stirred into collective action for a few short years. A scientist can put a price on a human body. They can add up the market value of the organic matter, minerals and trace elements and give you a price for the lot. It usually comes to a few thousand pounds. Economics is more generous in its evaluations. It

can compute the statistical value of a single life, to quantify a wrongful death claim or help decide whether to pay for a medical procedure or a piece of public infrastructure. For instance, if the statistical value of a single life is three million pounds, then a road improvement that would save one life must cost no more than this. The value of a statistical life factors in variables like age, life expectancy, current salary, earning potential and number of dependants. An affluent young person has a more valuable life, statistically, than a poor, old person. The poorest Londoner has a more valuable life than someone from Mogadishu.

But this isn't really how we respond to the riveting puzzle of selfhood, or how we feel when someone we love dies. Stephen Hawking might have been scientifically right when he said that humans were 'a chemical scum floating on the surface of a moderate-sized planet'.[35] In practice, though, we can't live our lives believing this. Kenneth R. Feinberg, the special master of the federal fund set up to compensate the families of victims of 9/11, conceded that he could not ultimately calculate how much each of the victims' lives was worth. 'You'd have to be a rabbi or a priest to try to answer that,' he said.[36] Stripped of the thin veneer of civilisation we may be, as King Lear says, 'no more but such a poor, bare, fork'd animal'. But still, we are priceless to ourselves and each other. Against all empirical evidence to the contrary, the humanities speak to this human need to imagine ourselves as irreplaceable – as what John Berger calls 'offal with flecks in it of the divine'.[37]

About ten years ago, a new word started to appear in English students' essays. Holden Caulfield is a *relatable* character, they would write, or his situation is *relatable*. This voguish word says much about our current demand that texts should be relevant, engaging and mirror our own experiences. The humanities scholar should introduce those students to the unrelatable – to texts that may discomfort and even bore them with their weirdness and difficulty. These texts will enlighten them about other human presences, distant and different from their own, that burn or burned as brightly and fiercely as theirs. The humanities are an ongoing lesson in otherness, in the infinite mystery and irreducibility of every human life. 'Human diversity is literature's lock and stock, as well as its *raison d'être*,' Joseph Brodsky writes. 'Literature is the greatest – surely greater than any creed – teacher of human subtlety.'[38] Texts studied in the humanities reveal both the granular particularity of each human mind and body, and the delicate, branching connections of shared meaning that link humans together. This paradox of the human condition – that we are unique, isolated consciousnesses and needy, mimetic, social beings – is the central preoccupation of human culture and of the humanities.

In her memoir *In the Days of Rain*, Rebecca Stott writes about growing up in the Exclusive Brethren, a Christian fundamentalist sect who kept themselves entirely separate from non-Brethren ('worldlies'), believing that they alone would be saved by the Rapture. Non-Brethren were seen as less than human. Brethren couldn't even share party walls with them, and they were not allowed television, newspapers, radios or books other than the Bible. Having freed herself from the cult, Stott went on to study English and Art History at the University of York. In her second year she read Charles Darwin and George Eliot and they gave her a new way of seeing. They taught her about the invisible web of intersubjective meanings and evolutionary inheritances that united humanity. When she became pregnant, she thought 'of the child growing inside my womb and that miraculous network of neural pathways forming in both his new brain and my older one. We *were* all "netted together", just as Darwin had said. Everything we did had an effect on the people around us.'[39]

This idea, that every life is both inestimably valuable in itself and part of a common humanity, is enshrined in most religions and the modern concept of human rights. And yet evidence lies all around us that some human lives matter less than others. How otherwise could we tolerate the reality of a refugee's dead body washed up on a Mediterranean coast, or found in a flimsy, drifting dinghy, or sold by human traffickers to harvest its corneas, liver and kidneys for sale on the organ black market? We tolerate it because on some level we see these human beings as less fully human than us.

Judith Butler uses the term 'grievability' to account for some human deaths being more mourned, or even noticed, than others. Grievability relies on exclusory notions of the human: if your death is not as grievable, then your life was less worth living.[40] The 'black lives matter' movement arose out of the injustice of unequal grievability – a sense that black lives are disposable or stripped of value, and that when black men die in custody it is as if 'someone who never existed has been nullified, so nothing has happened'.[41] Butler argues that the role of the humanities is to reinsert the human into where we have forgotten it exists – 'to return us to the human where we do not expect to find it, in its frailty and at the limits of its capacity to make sense'.[42]

We forget the human exists when we become too attached to certain kinds of story. The humanities teach us that stories can be toxic as well as liberating, that they can entrap us as well as enchant us, or entrap us because they enchant us. We find some stories so compelling that we get hung up on them, and do not notice how they turn other people into antagonists or bit-part players – or leave them out of the story altogether.

'We think we tell stories, but stories often tell us, tell us to love or to hate, to see or to be blind,' Rebecca Solnit writes. 'Often, too often, stories saddle us, ride us, whip us onward, tell us what to do, and we do it without questioning.'[43]

Much of Solnit's work has explored how masculine power gets to tell its own unchallenged story in a way that silences other stories. We have learnt recently that the most shocking things can seem normal – until there is a 'me too' or a 'time's up' moment and suddenly what seemed normal seems grotesque. The usual response to such paradigm shifts is to blame people in the recent past for normalising what now seems insupportable. But we should be careful not to acquit ourselves too readily of the same human weakness for overinvesting in stories.

By untangling the stories we tell and the words we use to tell them, the humanities scholar shows that all of us are fully human. In this commitment to our miscellaneous and capacious humanness, the humanities run counter to the desiccated professional discourse of modern life. A verbless, noun-ridden, self-proving language – the language of *deliverables*, *competencies*, *milestones* and *functionality* – has become the argot of modern managerialism. It is the language of a financialised capitalism that sees human capital as a faceless element in a process and a fixed cost to be reduced. Inside this language, anything can be claimed and nothing can be felt. No one says who did what to whom, or takes ownership or the blame. In order to seem rational and reasonable, it avoids mentioning any inconveniently actual, living humans. Because it sounds so boringly sane and incontrovertible, it can make the execrable seem routine, by burying it in euphemisms such as *collateral damage*, *extraordinary rendition* or *enhanced interrogation techniques*.

This deadened, indifferent attitude to language is what makes many people in public life sound so dull and vacuous. 'Every time I hear a political speech or I read those of our leaders,' a young Albert Camus wrote in his diary in August 1937, 'I am horrified at having, for years, heard nothing which sounded human.' He called these leaders 'hollow clowns'[44] – an apt way to describe how desensitised language empties us out and makes us feel unreal and unhuman to each other. The humanities remind us of the flawed, messy, inimitable humanity behind the metric-driven, quasi-rationalistic, monotone world evoked by managerialism.

Managerialism colludes with a techno-consumerism that also denies our full humanity by treating us as data or purchase points. This technology addresses us with words detached from any recognisable human source: disembodied announcements that apologise for any inconvenience caused, or tell us over on-hold music that our call is important,

or ask us to confirm that we are not a robot. Most banking transactions now take place without any human intervention at all. Much of what was once human activity, from shopping to diagnosing illnesses, is offloaded to apps and algorithms. Social media companies see users as data to be harvested and units to be targeted by advertisers, a process conducted by computer code. The humanities point to the voluminously human world that exists outside this virtual, algorithmic one – and to the fact that these algorithms are themselves human creations.

This does not mean that humanities scholarship will make us more emotionally literate or empathetic, or care more than a scientist does about human life in all its richness. Scientists get rightly irritated by any suggestion that the essential reductionism of their work blinds them to this deeper reality. A neuroscientist is no less captivated by the mysteries of consciousness just because they know that they are all held within that three-pound lump of jellified fat and protein inside our skulls. A geneticist values human life no less for being able to glimpse its makeup in DNA's double helix. Medical students often acquire a great respect for the cadavers they work on, a shared sense of the preciousness of life and the dignity and solidarity of death.

Even as science trains a harsh light on our own insignificance, it offers solace. Its technologies and prescriptions extend our lives and lessen their pain. Its insatiable curiosity about our tiny place in the universe is an end and pleasure in itself. And it can inspire a poetic, dizzying, consoling awareness of our own smallness, such as when powerful space telescopes capture the austere beauty of nebulae and spiral galaxies or the mind-bending unreality of black holes. But science can't do the one thing that the humanities can: show that human lives, in all their brevity, confusion, grief and joy, are meaningful. In Clifford Geertz's words, 'man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun'.[45] Only inside that web of self-spun meaning do our lives seem to matter.

The humanities are both chastening and heartening. They are chastening because they demonstrate that human potential is limited by the meanings we make and the stories we tell each other. They reveal us to be error-prone and self-sabotaging animals, acquiring ever more knowledge and yet failing to learn from it because we underestimate our ability to delude ourselves and each other. They alert us to the strangeness and cussedness of all human lives, and our propensity to be seduced and blindsided by the stories we tell.

And yet the humanities are also heartening. They suggest that, even within these limitations, human beings are endlessly inventive and resourceful. The humanities began in the creative ferment of the

Renaissance, with its rediscovery of the secular accomplishments of classical civilisation. The *studia humanitatis* were a hymn to the fullness of human potential. The humanities show that the highest human achievements occur when people trust in their own human skills, and when they act as if their lives, and the lives of those around them, matter.

The humanities remain a resilient and perhaps inextinguishable human impulse. Anxieties about funding cuts and falling student numbers are real. But as Irina Dumitrescu argues, the humanities are practised beyond the university and they have survived in the worst circumstances – of war, imprisonment, censorship and tyranny. Dumitrescu has examined how Romanian political prisoners under the Ceauseşcu regime created a clandestine university of the humanities behind bars. They shared poetry with each other in Morse code, by tapping, coughing or moving their chairs so that they squeaked. They formed study groups, teaching each other the plots of novels from memory. They learnt foreign languages by rubbing bottles with soap to improvise a scratchable writing surface. (After their release, some of these prisoners became professional translators.) One incarcerated professor of English wrote his lectures on string, tying knots for each letter.[46] The prisoners' love of the liberal arts was a way of retaining their dignity and humanity in a situation designed to destroy them. The humanities exist wherever human beings congregate and try to do more than simply survive. Human potential can't always be mapped on to skills gaps we have already decided we need to plug; often, it can only be fathomed when it has been fulfilled.

Some will say that this is a naive and retrograde view of education and scholarship, unattuned to the 'real world'. But that is another story they have told themselves – convincing enough, as all stories are, within its own self-contained bubble of meaning. What drew you to the humanities in the first place was that you were not quite sold on that story, nor convinced that it told you all you could know about human potential. You are still not sold on it. So I'm afraid that you are a humanities scholar, whether you (or they) like it or not.

Notes

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