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“The Humanities: Making the Case in a Time of Crisis”

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Thank you, John, for that kind introduction.

Good afternoon. I have to say that it is an unusual honor to be invited to comment on the state of the humanities before such a well-informed and dedicated audience, and just a few hours after the eloquent panelists who spoke yesterday afternoon at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences.

Five years ago, the Association of American Universities issued a comprehensive report titled *Reinvigorating the Humanities: Enhancing Research and Education on Campus and Beyond*. The report opens with an analysis of the challenges facing university-based work in the humanities, from doubts about its utility, to the effects of the “culture wars,” to low levels of student participation in humanities majors compared to business and professional fields, especially if one looks beyond the relatively narrow universe of selective institutions. Without quite endorsing the notion that the humanities are in crisis, the authors note that these factors are viewed in that light by many observers, and then go on to remark, a bit sardonically, “With current economic and world crises filling public consciousness, the crisis in the humanities pales a bit.”¹

Well, if that was true in 2004, how pale must any crisis in the humanities look today! In fact, hearing that reference to “economic and world crises,” you may have wondered what the authors could possibly have had in mind; in 2004, the economic crisis now gripping the world was not yet a twinkle in the eye of the most dire practitioners of the dismal science. If it was hard to get a hearing for the plight of the humanities in 2004, how much harder to be heard above the din of

¹ Association of American Universities, *Reinvigorating the Humanities: Enhancing Research and Education on Campus and Beyond*, ed. Katherine Bailey Mathae and Catherine Langrehr Birzer (Washington, DC: Association of American Universities, 2004), 4.

anxious voices that warn of a depression unlike anything the world has seen for some seven decades? How can one even utter the word “humanities” these days without being accused of fiddling while not just Rome but Rome and all its far-flung provinces burn? To make the case in a time like this will require an unusual combination of boldness and tact.

The timing is unfortunate, in part because we have never been better equipped to make the case for the need for public as well as private support for the humanities if this core component of the nation’s intellectual and cultural heritage is to flourish. For instance, thanks to the assiduous efforts of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences, we now have, as of January 7th of this year, the Humanities Indicators Prototype. The prototype is described as the first data set of its kind, containing “74 indicators and more than 200 tables and charts, providing broad-based, quantitative information about areas of concern in the humanities community.”² It is now easier than ever before to put hard numbers behind subjective impressions, for instance, of declining knowledge of history on the part of high school graduates. At the same time, there are some encouraging trends, including an increase in the number of high school students who do advanced work in foreign languages. In his contribution to the *Humanities Indicators Prototype*, William J. Reese sums up the data in this way: “The results of various school reforms . . . have been uneven, but modest progress has been made since the 1980s in expanding access to more academic and humanities courses.”³ At the college and university level, student participation in the humanities, after a huge expansion and sudden contraction between 1960 and 1985, appears to have held constant since then, with small ups and downs, at around 8% (but significantly higher than that at selective institutions). As Roger J. Geiger points out in his contribution, this stability in market share has coincided with an overall growth in enrollment, so that humanities departments have experienced a slow but steady growth in the numbers of their students and graduates.⁴

When it comes to comparative levels of federal funding for advanced work in the humanities on our college and university campuses, however, the picture is not

² American Academy of Arts and Sciences, “American Academy of Arts and Sciences Launches Humanities Indicators Prototype” (January 7, 2009) <http://www.amacad.org/news/hrcoAnnounced.aspx>.

³ William J. Reese, “Public Education and the Humanities” in *Humanities Indicators Prototype, Part I. Primary and Secondary Education in the Humanities*, <http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/essays/reese.pdf> (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2008), 4.

⁴ Roger L. Geiger, “Taking the Pulse of the Humanities: Higher Education in the Humanities Indicator Project,” in *Humanities Indicators Prototype, Part II. Undergraduate and Graduate Education in the Humanities*, <http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/essays/geiger.pdf> (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2008), 3.

even modestly promising. Here the results are aptly summarized by Alan Brinkley, who notes “a dangerous decline in both absolute and relative support for research across most areas of humanistic scholarship.”⁵ He points out the truly vast difference between funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities on one hand and both the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation:

NIH funding in 2007, a lean year for the agency, was just under \$30 billion, and NSF funding in that same year was well over \$5 billion. NEH funding for 2007 was approximately \$138.3 million — 0.5 percent of NIH funding and 3 percent of NSF. No one would expect the humanities to receive funding comparable to the medical and other sciences or even some of the social sciences. But when adjusted for inflation, the NEH budget today is roughly a third of what it was 30 years ago.⁶

And in fact, since Alan Brinkley wrote those words, the disparity he describes has grown even wider. The Fiscal Year 2009 Omnibus Appropriations Act now working its way through Congress contains \$30.3 billion for the NIH, \$6.5 billion for the NSF, and only \$155 million for the NEH. But those numbers don’t include the additional funds for the next two years in the Economic Stimulus Bill that Congress has already passed: \$10 billion for the NIH — again, this is on top of the \$30.3 billion in the omnibus bill — \$3 billion for the NSF, and zero for the NEH. (There were apparently some reports that the Stimulus Bill included some \$50 million for the NEH, but those funds were actually for the National Endowment for the Arts.)

Nor do those numbers, striking as they are, tell the whole story about the lack of public support for advanced study in the humanities. As Brinkley notes, support for humanities research accounts for “only a little over 13 percent of the NEH program budget, or about \$15.9 million. Most of the money supports a wide range of worthy activities,” with “the largest single outlay” going to “operating grants for state humanities councils, which disburse their modest funds mostly for public programs and support of local institutions.” In short, Brinkley concludes, “Government spending for the humanities, modest to begin with, goes overwhelmingly to projects that are at best loosely linked to scholarly research.”⁷

That phrase “at best loosely linked” applies to the situation in more ways than one. It isn’t just that what the government funds is only loosely linked with

⁵ Alan Brinkley, “The Landscape of Humanities Research and Funding,” in *Humanities Indicators Prototype, Part IV. Humanities Funding and Research*, <http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/essays/brinkley.pdf> (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2008), 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

humanities research; our greatest challenge in attracting public support for, or even attention to, humanities research is the difficulty of establishing more than a very loose — indeed, a highly tenuous, problematic, and controversial — link between what humanities scholars do and the kinds of benefits that legislators and policymakers seek. Brinkley remarks at one point, “Academic humanists correctly argue that their work is of great importance to the larger world, as a source of values and knowledge that is of both moral and practical importance.”⁸ Note his use of the adverb *correctly*. I suspect that everyone in this room agrees that humanists argue correctly that their work is important; correctly — but *convincingly*?

Here I think it’s worth pausing to note the special challenges involved in making a persuasive case, today, for public investment in the humanities. We have now reached a point where every dime Congress spends that does not have a directly stimulating effect on the economy is seen as adding to the rapidly mounting burden of debt that our children and grandchildren must bear, and that will conceivably choke off the long-term viability of the recovery that everyone assures us will begin at some point (perhaps one year; perhaps five!). The case for the humanities was always hard to make, but now we face an audience that is less patient, more skeptical, and no less ready to score points against perceived elitism than the one we were addressing a year ago. Given that context, what argument should we be making, this year even more urgently than in the past?

The least promising approach, it seems to me, although one that appeals to humanists who are understandably envious of the largesse enjoyed by their colleagues in other fields, is to point to the ways in which advanced humanistic work either is, or might become, more like work in the sciences, and may even be necessary for the sciences to deliver the social benefits they promise. I will mention two examples of the sort of science envy — or, to label it more positively, science emulation — that seems to me to point humanities advocates in the wrong, or at least not in an entirely helpful, direction.

First, there is the claim that advanced work in the humanities is essential to the development and/or preservation of a culture of innovation. I don’t mean to suggest that this claim is untrue, but I also don’t know how to state it in a form that will convince even a moderately skeptical audience. Last year’s keynote speaker — and it’s quite an honor to succeed him in this role — was MIT president emeritus Charles Vest. After commenting on the fierce competition the U.S. is facing from the growth of innovation elsewhere, Dr. Vest stated his conviction that “one comparative advantage we in the United States retain at least for a few years is that we educate our engineers in a milieu in which science and engineering education are mixed in a great stew with the humanities, the arts and the social sciences. I am convinced, though some disagree, that this greatly enhances the creativity and innovativeness of our graduates.” He went on to warn that this

⁸ Ibid., 1.

“comparative advantage will not last long,” citing significant new investments in the liberal arts by the business-savvy government of Singapore.⁹

As Vest noted, not everyone agrees that study of the humanities actually does possess this innovation-enhancing role. After all, for every English, History, or Religious Studies major who went on to found a high-tech company or to invent a “killer app,” one can find others who never majored in anything at all. And who knows whether the comparative creativity and flexibility of U.S. engineers is really a function of their exposure to the one or two humanities courses they may take to fulfill their distribution requirements, rather than to the fluidity — at least until recently — of the U.S. financial system, or the habit of questioning authority and received wisdom that is built into American culture and reflected to one degree or another at all levels of U.S. education?

But let’s suppose, for the sake of argument, that someone has devised a methodology that demonstrates the beneficial effects of exposure to the humanities on the creativity of engineers. How would that justify the kind of investment in advanced research — in serious and extended works of scholarship and in the rigorous training of graduate and post-graduate investigators — that so sharply distinguishes public investments in the sciences from those in the humanities? Arguably, all one needs to deliver the kind of benefit that Vest affirms is an undergraduate humanities teaching program, taught by a small if dedicated cadre of teachers, perhaps but not necessarily possessing advanced degrees.

A second version of science emulation is evident in efforts to make humanities research less narrowly discipline-bound and more broadly and actively cross-disciplinary. The model here is the kind of multi-disciplinary, often multi-institutional big science project that figures so visibly in funding decisions by NASA, the Department of Defense, NIH, or the NSF, including, for instance, the NSF’s Engineering Research Centers. Perhaps, the thinking goes, humanities scholars can make a case for at least a fraction of such support if they mount compelling projects that bring together scholars of literature, history, art history, and philosophy for conferences and courses on subjects in which their interests overlap.

But here’s the problem. When scientists and engineers work together, it’s usually clear at the outset what problems they are trying to solve, what specific questions they are trying to answer, and why the answers depend on the contributions of the different disciplines they represent. For instance, to take one current example from my own institution, one wants to understand the electrophysiological events that cause ventricular fibrillation, a type of cardiac arrhythmia that kills nearly a thousand Americans every day. So one brings together physicians and engineers from a range of subspecialties to build the

⁹ Charles M. Vest, *Keynote Address: National Humanities Alliance Annual Conference and Humanities Advocacy Day*, (National Humanities Alliance, March 3, 2008) http://www.nhalliance.org/bm~doc/charlesvest_2008.pdf.

computational models and the monitoring equipment needed to find the answers. Although new directions of inquiry and the need for additional experts will no doubt emerge along the way, everyone knows from the outset the kind of contribution that each specialist is expected to make, and why that contribution is required for the success of the project as a whole.

When humanists get together to address a common topic, there is nothing approaching the same understanding in advance of what precise problem the project is designed to solve, or how the expertise of the various disciplines brought to the table will contribute to its solution. Suppose the topic is the nature of cities; or the discovery of the so-called New World; or the entanglement of early American democracy in issues of slavery and race. In fashioning a conference or a course on one of these fascinating topics, one brings together scholars from a wide range of fields: history, literature, art history, philosophy, as well as social scientific fields whose self-understanding at least verges on the humanistic, such as sociology, economics, political science, and law.

Again, what is strikingly different about the humanities case, especially when contrasted with the scientific one, is the absence in the former of even the slightest expectation that the combined efforts of these particular disciplines will yield a solution to some clearly namable and definable problem. The point isn't that the humanities groups are less serious or successful than their science and engineering counterparts; it's rather that they have an entirely different structure and function. Their role is not to solve a problem or to answer a particular question but to illuminate the topic; to deepen and at the same time complicate our understanding of it; to advance the conversation about it; to open new and unanticipated avenues of reflection and inquiry into this topic and those to which it may turn out to be suggestively related.

Their role, in other words, is not forensic, diagnostic, pragmatic, or therapeutic. Their role is humanistic. And that, in a time of crisis, is the problem.

So now consider a very different way of defending the relevance of the humanities: emphasizing their role in developing a democratic citizenry by fostering moral sensitivity, practical wisdom, and the skills and habits essential to the conduct of rational, civil, deliberative debate. Recently, the premise of that approach has been sharply criticized by the literary scholar and former university administrator Stanley Fish. In his book *Save the World on Your Own Time*, Fish argues, with characteristic energy, that professional scholars are trained in highly specialized forms of inquiry and have no business setting themselves up as purveyors of either morality or wisdom. Whatever moral lessons a student may take away from the formal study of an academic discipline will be a matter, Fish argues, of "serendipity": "teachers cannot," he writes, except for a serendipity that by definition cannot be counted on, fashion moral character, or inculcate respect for others, or produce citizens of a certain temper. Or, rather, they cannot do these

things unless they abandon the responsibilities that belong to them by contract in order to take up responsibilities that belong properly to others.¹⁰

Fish is not denying, he goes on to explain, that moral or political values belong in the classroom, but they should arrive there, if the teacher is doing her job, precisely and only as objects of academic study — not as life-choices the instructor encourages her students to adopt.

It's noteworthy that Fish's view of the academy as a whole, whether one shares it or not, is closely related to his view of the humanities in particular. He makes the connection explicit by way of an analogy between academic study and poetry, which he calls "the liberal arts activity par excellence."¹¹ Commenting on the example of Milton's dramatization of religiously inspired violence in Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, Fish argues that the purpose of a poem is to place the reader in "a reflective stance toward the issues it dramatizes. 'Reflective' is the key word," he continues, because it names both what poets do — reflect on matters like the relationship between political action and religious commitment — and what interpreters do in return — trace out the shape of reflection as it poses problems and teases them out to their edges. The exploration of problems, not their solution, and certainly not a program of political action, is what poetry offers. And if we take up that offer, our reward is not a recipe for dealing with the next crisis in our lives but a deepened understanding of the questions and moral conundrums the poet presents for our contemplation.¹²

Now it does seem to me that Fish may be too hasty in dismissing the role of humanistic study in, for instance, inculcating a respect for others. One can always find examples like the concentration camp commandant who was a reader of Goethe and a lover of Mozart, and in that sense Fish is surely right to stress the role of serendipity in bringing about whatever actual effect an exposure to complex texts and multiple points of view may have on any particular student. On balance, however, it's hard to doubt that a student who has been trained in forming, articulating, discussing, and revising interpretations of any complex social or cultural phenomenon will be better prepared to participate in public life than he or she otherwise would be. Why would we not want citizens to have at least some exposure to those skills, and to what Justice Souter called yesterday those "habits of mind"?

But the difficulty arises, once again, if we turn from the value of *some* degree of training in, or at least exposure to, the humanities to the value of advanced humanistic study — that is, study at the graduate, post-graduate, and professorial levels, or what we might call advanced and organized curiosity — and ask what role

¹⁰ Stanley Fish, *Save the World on Your Own Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 14.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹² *Ibid.*, 51-52.

those levels of engagement with literature, history, or philosophy might play in the service of a healthy democracy. Why not invest our limited discretionary dollars in the high schools, in undergraduate teaching programs, or, perhaps better yet, in institutions such as museums, libraries, and education centers, that expose the broader public to humanistic values, exactly as the NEH has done? Earlier I quoted Alan Brinkley's comment on that striking trend: you'll recall his observing that the largest single outlay in the 2007 NEH budget was to state humanities councils, which in turn supported public programs and local institutions that were, in his words, "at best loosely linked to scholarly research."¹³ Brinkley, of course, deplors that situation:

Many more people encounter humanities and the arts through the public institutions and programs that receive support than will come into contact with academic scholarship in the humanities. But these institutions themselves benefit enormously from the work of humanities scholars, and often engage them in their public activities, while providing no significant financial support for their research. There is, in other words, an important connection between what academics do and what the public sees, but little connection between the money that goes to public activities and the scholars who provide much of the knowledge on which these activities rely. The skewing of funding away from scholarship and toward institutions serving the broader public endangers the health of both academia and the public it helps serve.¹⁴

There lies, I believe, the fundamental disconnect that we advocates for the humanities have so far not succeeded in overcoming, the perceptual gap we have not yet figured out how to close. No one really doubts that American society is better off with a vital awareness of its intellectual, cultural, and historical past than it would be if it were locked in a permanent, stultifying amnesia. And no one will doubt, on reflection, that even local museums are better able to preserve that awareness if they are informed by the best available sources of expertise regarding whatever part of our collective past they are dedicated to keeping alive. But the experts themselves are mostly hidden from public view, sequestered in the academy, precisely as they must be if they are to have the time and the exposure to teachers, colleagues, and students that they need to become experts in the first place and then to keep their expertise alive. (There are of course exceptions: popular historians like Doris Kearns Goodwin and David McCullough, but they would

¹³ Alan Brinkley, "The Landscape of Humanities Research and Funding," in *Humanities Indicators Prototype, Part IV. Humanities Funding and Research*, 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

be the first to tell you that their popular histories are only made possible by their ability to stand on the shoulders of those who work much further from the public eye.)

How, then, do we close the gap? Not, I think, by emulating the sciences or claiming a moral or practical wisdom we cannot reliably deliver. In fact, I doubt we will close the perceptual gap with any kind of philosophical or economic argument, no matter how amply documented by the latest statistics. (The one exception may be the economic argument that investing in the humanities is much *cheaper* than investing in just about anything else!) What we must bring to the table is not so much an argument as a certain kind of *exemplification*, a bringing to life and not just a description of the way advanced and organized curiosity revitalizes the past and makes it available to students and the public alike.

“Exemplification” sounds abstract, but what I really have in mind is something very simple: we have to put the legislators and policymakers directly in touch with, immediately in the presence of, the persons who themselves most powerfully exemplify the role of advanced and organized curiosity in making and keeping the nation’s heritage alive. We could do far worse, I think, than simply taking our best graduate students with us to the halls of Congress, where they can display their passionate and contagious curiosity about their subjects — their excitement about what it’s like to engage in the kind of reflection that, as Fish writes, “poses problems and teases them out to their edges.” And if you don’t have graduate students, or don’t have any with you, then you could do far worse than to exemplify that excitement yourself, and to invite your Congressional interlocutors to share it. The truth is that, if you do it right, they will enjoy the experience, and they may even appreciate the respect you have shown them by inviting them to participate in what matters so much to you. And that experience of participating in what fascinates you or your students will be far more likely than any argument to make the case that the vitality of a nation’s relation to its past really does depend on the robust cultivation of advanced expertise.

Thank you.