

10-20-81

To: Ernie
From: Wray

Here is a draft of the humanities speech. I've tried to use the final section of the anniversary essay as an outline, restoring some material from an earlier draft and incorporating the new material I've come up with on the humanities.

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The late Lionel Trilling, when he was invited to deliver the first of the Thomas Jefferson Lectures in the Humanities in 1972, took the occasion to explore the historical connection between learning and the body politic. In that lecture, which he titled "Mind in the Modern World," Trilling explained that during the sixteenth century there emerged for the first time a consciousness among those of the aristocracy that certain "habits of mind" might be germane to the activities of government, that the various qualities of the intellect might be incorporated into the national life. Children of the nobility and the gentry began to seek an intellectual education--rather than the traditional training in manners--and, as Trilling explained, "In doing so, in pursuing their inarticulated intuition that mind made the model of practical activity of society, they proposed the ideal nature of the modern nation-state."

It must have been an extraordinary realization--that the general cultivation of the intellect (and it was not training in statecraft per se that they sought, but rather a liberal, humanistic flexing of the mind) might contribute to proper national conduct. Indeed, it has become a fundamental element of modern consciousness, as Trilling went on to say:

With the passage of time that dim perception has achieved a fuller consciousness--we now judge societies and their governments by the same criteria we use in estimating the rightness of the conduct of mind. We judge them by their energy, their intentionality, their impulse toward inclusiveness, by their striving toward coherence with due regard for the integrity of the disparate elements they comprise, by their power of looking before and after. Plato, when he undertook to say what the right conduct of mind should be, found the paradigm in a just society. We reverse

that procedure, finding the paradigm of a just society in the right conduct of mind.

Trilling was ultimately sober in his thesis, however. When the mind becomes so central to national life--as, he argued, it had in America--then "any falling off of its confidence in itself must be felt as a diminution of national possibility, as a lessening of social hope." Today, Trilling argued nearly a decade ago, intellect "draws back from its own freedom and power."

The relationship between learning and national life, between education and human conduct, has always been the central concern of higher education. It is a complex relationship. Although Trilling was able to conclude his lecture hopefully, predicting that American intellect would correct its course, it is difficult a decade later to be sanguine. The diminution of national possibility seems to continue apace, largely due to a failure of nerve in the academy--more specifically, a failure of nerve among humanists.

The so-called crisis in the humanities has persisted so long that it has come to be perceived by many as a permanent state of affairs. Humanists feel, and act, beleaguered. Thirty-five years ago, the philosopher Karl Jaspers--having just spent the war years in intellectual exile in Hitler's Germany--set the tone that has characterized discussion of the humanities and education since. Science, Jaspers said, loses its sense of direction if left alone; it must be directed by humanistic philosophy. The goal of education, he said, is to meld humanism and science into culture, which he defined

as a "coherent system of associations, gestures, values, ways of putting things," Perhaps with World War II too recently past, however, Jaspers concluded that the educational ideal which would produce cultured people--"in which humanism and the realism of the natural sciences are joined to one another for their mutual enlightenment"--remained an illusive ideal.

Today, a generation after Jaspers wrote, we find ourselves, as a nation, uncertain and hesitant about higher education's larger social role. In Jaspers' terms, what are this society's agreed upon values and "ways of putting things"? For that matter, what precisely would characterize a person of culture, in Jaspers' sense, in our fragmented post-modern society? The absence of answers is haunting.

There was a time when ~~XXXXX~~ the academy felt no such uncertainties. The task was to transmit to the next generation, intact, society's moral, cultural, and political values and traditions. This mission was never fully achieved, yet it was once so vital that in most nineteenth century colleges the presidents taught a "moral philosophy" course as a curricular capstone. Even after the direct influence of the church declined, there remained the conviction that the academy represented a bastion of moral order.

Much of that perception had to do with the strong humanistic tradition that permeated colleges and universities. As the political philosopher, Sheldon Wolin, wrote recently in the journal Democracy, for three centuries colleges and universities "had had the task of preserving, replenishing, and transmitting

the religious, moral, and civic traditions of American society. Although the importance of science, mathematics, and modern languages had long been given curricular recognition, whatever coherence there was to higher education had come primarily from a core of Christian and classical teachings. This was not surprising given the strong emphasis that was placed on 'virtue' and 'character' as educational ideals fully equal in importance to knowledge itself."

Wolin continues: "Even after religion had been gradually eliminated as the defining element in many colleges and most universities, the 'humanities,' abetted by moral and political philosophy, provided a coherent set of constitutive principles that undergirded and informed the more specialized skills that were already a feature of the industrial society that emerged after the Civil War. This prescientific university and college culture persisted until World War II."

World War II was a watershed for education and humanistic culture. Reading essays from the late 1930s and early 1940s, it is not uncommon to find references to the "inhumanities" as something which existed in opposition to the humanities. The "inhumanities" referred to the rise of fascism and totalitarianism, then increasingly to the monstrous misuses of science. This is the significance of World War II: in the minds of many, the war pitted science ^{intellectual} and the humanities against one another in a fashion never before so exclusive. The flavor of this ~~EVENT~~ occurrence is captured no better than in an essay by the late Jacob Bronowski who, while serving

as Carnegie Professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1953, wrote this description of his visit to Nagasaki harbor in 1945:

The shadows behind me were the skeletons of the Mitsubishi factory buildings, pushed backwards and sideways as if by a giant hand. What I had thought to be broken rocks was a concrete power house with its roof punched in. I could make out the outline of two crumpled gasometers; there was a cold furnace festooned with service ~~XXXXX~~ pipes; otherwise nothing but cockeyed telephone poles and loops of wire in a bare waste of ashes. I had blundered into this desolate landscape as instantly as one might awake among the craters of the moon. The moment of recognition when I realized I was already in Nagasaki is present to me as I write, as vividly as when I lived it. I see the warm night and the meaningless shapes; I can even remember the tune that was coming from the ship. It was a dance tune which had been popular in 1945, and it was called 'Is you Is Or Is You Ani't Ma Baby?'

For Bronowski, the strains of that dance tune took on menacingly symbolic overtones: It is "civilized man," surveying the specter of Nagasaki harbor, who, contemplating his future, asks, 'Is You Is Or Is You Ain't Ma Baby?' It was a "universal moment," Bronowski suggests, one in which modern man's pride in his own progress had been transformed into horror. "On an evening like that evening, some time in 1945, each of us in his own way learned that his imagination had been dwarfed."

Hiroshima and Nagasaki—not to mention Buchenwald, Auschwitz, and fire-bombed Dresden—may seem irrelevant to the educational issues we confront today. Still, they have the odd effect of forcing us to inquire once again into deeply troubling, and perhaps unanswerable, questions about knowledge and its uses, about the relationship between education and human conduct. The destruction Bronowski witnessed was a techno-

logical achievement built on trained intelligence, and we cannot help wondering what discipline of mind, what knowledge more adequately comprehended, what values more effectively conveyed, could have an equally powerful impact for human betterment.

Several years later, this memory of Nagasaki inspired Bronowski to write three lectures, published collectively under the title Science and HumanValues. Although surely not the first to address the subject of science and values, Bronowski was among the first to address the subject with the realization that it had been changed forever. Oddly, Bronowski's vision, served up with the debris of post-war Japan, has the effect of recalling classical discussions of liberal learning. Precisely one century before, John Henry Cardinal Newman had urged universities to set as their central task the education of gentlemen. To Newman, it should be remembered, a gentleman was simply "one who never inflicts pain."

The simplicity of Newman's definition stands in stark contrast to the complexity of the task. The notion of a gentleman has fallen into disuse; indeed, no past ideal of culture seems entirely appropriate for American society as it approaches the 21st century. Hence the crisis in the humanities. In the three and a half decades since the war no less than three national Commissions on the Humanities have been established to ponder the importance of the humanities; a federal endowment was created to fund work in the humanities; a membership association has been established to advance the humanities.

Still, a convincing argument for the importance of humanistic study to the national life is difficult to articulate, and students continue to avoid study in the humanities in record numbers.

Part of the problem--and this has been reinforced by the self-consciousness of humanists in recent years--is that the humanities are perceived as a rather inflexible and antiquated set of disciplines. It is a notion which bears scant resemblance to the historical development of the humanities and humanistic culture. Scholars of the humanities and humanism generally trace the concept back to the second century grammarian, Aulus Gellius, who used the word humanitas to signify "learning and education in the liberal arts, since (he noted) those who earnestly desire and seek after these are the most highly humanized."

The earliest humanities curriculum, in a sense, must be that of Quintilian, a follower of Cicero, who designed what were known as the trivium and quadrivium, together consisting of the seven liberal arts: grammar, rhetoric, logic, geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, and harmonics (or music). The humanities clearly did not exist in opposition to science. The study of man and the world--ranging from language to the stars--had a unifying purpose, to discipline the mind and free it from ignorance.

But as Otto Bird has explained in his book, Cultures in Conflict, the humanities became more and more narrowly conceived through the ages. In the Middle Ages, the "arts of

words" came to be distinguished from the "arts of the real world," what we would now call science. During the Renaissance, humanists referred to studia humanitatis (grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, moral philosophy) as opposed to studia divinitatis, or theology. What ~~XXXXXX~~ academicians now know as the "divisions" of knowledge were beginning to crystallize. Through the centuries one discipline or another has dropped out of the humanities while other things found their way in, so that today there is no commonly understood notion of ~~XXX~~ just what the humanities are or do.

The exclusive identification of the humanities with language, as a thing contrary to science, may in the end be unhelpful. As Bird argues, "The humanities have long been closely associated with the linguistic arts. They should not, however, be identified with them. To do so would be, in effect, to deprive them of content. Cicero was certainly right in emphasizing that verbal art by itself does not suffice to make a man eloquent. Language may serve to distinguish man as human and set him apart from the rest of animal creation, but by itself this does not make him humane. There is more than an accidental verbal connection between such words as human, humane, human or humane studies, and humanities. They serve to determine an area of concern, interest, and inquiry that centers upon man and all that is most distinctive and characteristic about him, his common humanity that is shared by all men."

The humanitas of Cicero, Bird explains, consisted of the possession of linguistic arts, which certify humanity,

and knowledge of the fundamental human concerns that make a more perfect, more polished humanity. Although Cicero was a hero of the humanities, he argues, he underestimated the value of science, which as "a great human achievement, a work of the mind, and a product of culture" is a fundamental human concern demanding humanistic attention.

America's colleges and universities must perform an integrative function, seeking appropriate responses to life's most enduring questions, concerning themselves not just with information but with wisdom. In the end, education's primary mission is to develop within each student the capacity to judge wisely in ^{human} matters. This imperative does not replace the need for rigorous study in the disciplines; but neither must specialization become an excuse to suspend judgment or to interfere with the search for worthwhile goals.

Gunnar Myrdal, in an essay on "The Future University" which he wrote during the first year of the Johnson Administration's War on Poverty, offered an optimistic view of American society and higher education in the year 2000, predicting universal higher education and the professionalization of American society. But he expressed concern over the monopoly of information; interestingly, it was the possibility of a cultural monopoly that concerned him. "It would not seem to be in the public interest," he wrote, "for one group of students to monopolize information in these fields. Education for continued 'cultural consumption' and for participation in national and community affairs must be pursued through all

lines of study if we are to avoid having professionals who are cultural and social idiots and a select group that instead, or besides, are 'cultured people.'"

Myrdal's perspective is instructive. Preoccupied as we are today with a scientific elite comprised of "cultural and social idiots," it is easy to overlook the converse danger-- a cultural elite that is comprised of scientific and technological idiots. In fact, we are threatened by both trends. What is needed in higher education, as C.P. Snow wrote in his classic analysis of the academy, is a "clashing point" between The Two Cultures, a point that he unfortunately found lacking.

"There seems to be no place where the cultures meet," Lord Snow wrote. ". . . The clashing point of two subjects, two disciplines, two cultures--of two galaxies, as far as that goes--ought to produce creative chances." But because of an apparently unbridgeable gulf between scientists and humanists, the university has become a place of missed opportunities. He called for a complete rethinking of British education.

Interestingly, Lord Snow was convinced that "the divide is nothing like so unbridgeable" in the United States:

So it is at Yale and Princeton and Michigan and California, that scientists of world standing are talking to non-specialized classes: at M.I.T. and Cal. Tech. where students of the sciences are receiving a serious humane education. In the last few years, all over the country, a visitor cannot help being astonished by the resilience and inventiveness of American higher education--ruefully so, if it happens to be an Englishman.

In A Second Look, Lord Snow called attention to the emergence of a third culture, a culture made up of those studying the human effects of the scientific revolution--a distinctively American culture.

Snow was premature. For whatever reasons, the third culture never emerged. Knowledge and the academy are as fragmented, if not more fragmented, than ever; if the two cultures no longer persist, it is not because they have been successfully integrated but rather because they have splintered into innumerable specialties. More than ever, ~~WHATEVER~~ we as a nation are in need of an intellectual center, something ^{to} ~~that~~ unify the intellectual enterprise, prevent it from flying apart according to its natural tendency.

This problem is not a new one, of course; nor is the idea of the university as the locus for synthesis and integration. It was the idea underlying Cardinal Newman's prescription; much later Jose Ortega y Gasset called for a Faculty of Culture to accomplish much the same thing. For Robert M. Hutchins it was an imperative: He recommended the elimination of departments and the creation in its place of three faculties--natural sciences, social sciences, and metaphysics. "The medieval university had a principle of unity," Hutchins wrote in The Higher Learning in America. "It was theology. . . . But these are other times; and we are trying to discover a rational and practical order for the higher learning of today." His answer was to reinstate metaphysics, the study of "first principles," which would serve to focus the search for knowledge.

These, too, are other times. What have dramatically changed even since Hutchins' time are the possibilities and perils of science. But science cannot turn the glass on itself. The point is made nowhere better than in a 1968 lecture by Nobel prize-winning biologist Peter B. Medawar, who called for the creation of a new discipline. "Scientific methodology," Medawar wrote, " . . . has nothing to do with the motives and purposes of scientists or with the degree to which their work achieves them: science is known to us in terms of accomplishment, not in terms of endeavor. It does not attempt to justify science in any sense except the scientific; above all it does not try to see scientific thought and action as elements of general culture. What should be the equivalent in science of literary criticism is therefore represented by a great emptiness which is the reproach to all scholars, scientists and humanists alike. I cannot even think of a new name for the new discipline that might fill those empty spaces."

Eric Ashby, the eminent British scientist and educational theorist, has proposed a name for this discipline: "technological humanism." "The habit of apprehending a technology in its completeness: this," Ashby says, "is the essence of technological humanism, and this is what we should expect education in higher technology to achieve." Technology, Lord Ashby suggests, could be made the core of "a new twentieth century humanism," just as Greek was the core of Renaissance humanism.

It is in this kind of intellectual center--Hutchins' metaphysics, Ortega's Faculty of Culture, Snow's "clashing point,"

whatever would fill Medawar's "empty spaces--it is here that values emerge; and when the center is lacking, so too are the values that will guide American society. It should be remembered that Cicero's ideal orator was not simply a smooth talker but one "perfect in every kind of speech and humanitas." Wisdom for Cicero combined humanistic knowledge with eloquence; speech, however eloquent, if divorced from philosophy, was empty rhetoric (indeed, rhetoric has a perjorative ring today precisely because it has become isolated from humanistic sensibility). On the other hand, the humanities cannot be pursued in isolation from elocution, said Cicero, by which he meant that knowledge must be used to address human affairs, public issues.

Cicero would be doubly disappointed at the public debate surrounding our most pressing concern--the use and misuse of science. While politicians have mastered the art of rhetoric (in its worst sense) and glibly rule on society's future, humanists have become increasingly specialized and have turned their backs on the affairs of men. Norman Foerster, writing in The Humanities and the Common Man, argues that "an education permeated by the humanistic spirit has always included science." There is no science, he notes, other than that which human beings produce, and they produce it because they value the passion to know. But when American men of science were revolted by the Nazi's perversion of science, Foerster points out, they were reacting as humanists.

These sentiments were echoed by the 1964 Commission

on the Humanities, which opened its report by noting that "Whatever scientists may learn concerning the physical world is or should be of profound interest to the humanist . . . Science is far more than a tool for adding to our security and comfort. It embraces in its broadest sense all efforts to achieve valid and coherent views of reality; as such, it extends the boundaries of experiences and adds new dimensions to human character. If the interdependence of science and the humanities were more generally understood, men would be more likely to become masters of their technology and not its unthinking servants."

This is not to suggest a program of indoctrination in place of investigation; it is not to say that there should be a rigid code of moral conduct prescribed by humanists or anyone else. Indeed, as the recent attacks of two university presidents on religious extremism in America underscores, the role of humanists is not to dictate values but to keep value questions up front for discussion. Howard Mumford Jones, in the report of the first humanities commission in 1958, made intentionally modest claims for the humanities which are worth recalling. "A rich acquaintance with philosophy, ^{and the arts}" Jones wrote, "has been acquired by various unlovely characters without, apparently, influencing them for the good. . . . Perhaps nobody knows how to make any human being better, happier, or more capable, but at the very least the humanities, humane learning, and humanistic scholarship help to sustain a universe of thought in which these questions have meaning and in which adult minds may have the opportunity to work out such problems for themselves."

The Harvard philosopher Ralph Barton Perry, in a 1937 lecture on "A Definition of the Humanities," argued that "'The humanities' is not to be employed as a mere class name for certain divisions of knowledge or parts of a scholastic curriculum, or for certain human institutions, activities and relationships, but to signify a certain condition of freedom which these may serve to create." Freedom, for Perry, was "enlightened choice"—"action in which habit, reflex or suggestion are superseded by an individual's fundamental ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ judgments of good or evil; the action whose premises are explicit; the action which proceeds from personal reflection and integration." Renaissance humanism, Perry notes, was originally a "cult of freedom"—freedom from ignorant action.

The question for our society is whether we want the public debate to be informed by learning, imagination, sympathy, dignity, and civility, or the opposite, which is to have public decisions made by those lacking humanistic sensibility, whom Perry describes thus: "The man who lacks freedom is ignorant, narrow, indoctrinated or dogmatic, through lack of learning; literal minded, pedantic, habituated or vulgar, through lack of imagination; insensible, apathetic, prejudiced, censorious, opportunistic, sordid or self-absorbed, through lack of sympathy; base, ascetic, trivial, or snobbish, through lack of dignity; dull, boorish or brutal, through lack of civility."

Sheldon Wolin views the shifting⁺ academic culture as requiring urgent attention; "when education shifts from a liberal-humanistic foundation, which had incorporated elements from the earlier religious foundation, to a scientific and

technical one, crucial questions are posed concerning the future source of civic values. . . . Science is a source neither of moral renewal nor of political vision; it has no principle that requires solicitude for traditions or historical identities that, until recently, were the basis for most political thinking and action. There is still time to deal with this problem before the memory of democracy and education is obliterated, but it requires a clearer picture of the stakes and their form."

The stakes are high, and nowhere captured so eloquently as by Howard Mumford Jones in his 1958 report. Rather than arguing for demonstrable results of the humanities, Jones suggested considering a world without the humanities:

What would vanish? All formal knowledge of language and all formal knowledge of languages, ancient and modern, would be gone. There would be no grammars, dictionaries, or textbooks. The capacity to translate anything from one language to another . . . would die out, since the tradition of formal literary expression would vanish. We could not interpret the Bible, since we would have no orderly acquaintance with Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. Because we would have no orderly acquaintance with any other language, we would be equally baffled as to the meaning of any classic--Homer, Shakespeare, Proust. The unifying force of the public schools in language would weaken and die in the absence of proper textbooks and be replaced perhaps by oral traditions that would vary more and more from region to region and eventually become unintelligible. Publishing would be severely handicapped and might disappear. Communication between man and man would grow more and more ad hoc.

Jones goes on, adding more and more details to this scenario of human isolation, building to this conclusion: "and most important to us all, we could not understand 'Americanism,' since the statement that all men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights would be unintelligible."