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Human Nature, the Humanities and Neoliberalism

An Exploration

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Abstract

What is the purpose of studying the humanities? This paper suggests we need to revisit this fundamental question by reclaiming an older, pre-Enlightenment vision of the humanities – a vision premised on a different view of human nature and invested in the notions of contemplation, wisdom, virtue and universality. These are not amorphous notions but are associated with traditions through which they are practiced and realized. And when applied to the sphere of late modernity, they tend act in opposition to features characteristic of this modernity. Specifically: contemplation as against the commoditizing of ideas; wisdom as against information without terminus; virtue as against subjectivity defined in terms of rights; and universality as against identity politics. It is our view that this older vision of the humanities – and the key to its 'relevance' today – is that it provides a refuge against, and a challenge to, the corrosive onslaught of a dehumanizing neoliberal modernity.

Keywords

human nature – humanities – neoliberalism – universality – contemplation – virtues – wisdom

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> And since it is beautiful, it is truly useful.
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> ANTOINE DE SAINT-EXUPÉRY, *The Little Prince*, chapter 14

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1 Introduction

I want to make a fairly bold claim in this article: that the humanities should not simply seek to "exist" – to fight for survival – in the contemporary academy.[1] It should not simply seek to justify its relevance amidst the natural and economic sciences (or amidst a kind of social science that is modeled on the latter two). On the contrary, the humanities should challenge the implicitly neoliberal ethos of the current academy.[2] It should challenge the way these other fields are instrumentalized in this ethos. In other words, far from having to justify its "relevance," it should make them question the kind of relevance that is imputed to their own fields.

But to do so we cannot rely on humanities that are complicit with the paradigm of modernity (and by extension postmodernity) in which this neoliberal ethos, via its notion of the sovereign individual,[3] ultimately resides. This paradigm derives from the Enlightenment and is rooted in a dualist view of reality that separates "is" from "ought," fact from value, the individual self from the social self.[4] The result is a bifurcation that separates reality into various independent parts: philosophy as distinct from social life, religion as distinct from politics, philosophy as distinct from theology, and so forth. There are, of

1 We follow Rens Bod's definition of the humanities – a definition which is at once pragmatic and historical. "The humanities", says Bod, "are disciplines that are taught and studied at humanities faculties" (2). This pragmatism is a necessary entry point for our article. But, of course, the study of these disciplines have a genealogy that, as Bod points out, are traceable to Antiquity and resonates across civilizations (Western, Chinese, Islamic, Indian). There is "an unbroken tradition in the study of humanistic material that goes back to the Roman *artes liberales* and further to the Hellenistic curriculum …" (3). Moreover, it "emerges that there is almost nowhere that the history of the humanities can be considered in isolation. Panini's Indian linguistics, for example, first filtered through to China and Islamic civilization, and after that had profound effects in the study of language in Europe" (5). In other words – and for the purposes of this article – what constitutes the humanities today has modern as well as premodern, particular as well as universal, variations. See Rens Bod, *A New History of the Humanities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1–12.

2 We follow Paul Treanor in seeing neo-liberalism as hyper-liberalism – as a liberalism that seeks to extend all activities, and not just strictly economic ones, into the realm of the market, the realm of commodities. See Paul Treanor, "Neoliberalism: Origins, Theory, Definition," http://web.inter.nl.net/users/Paul.Treanor/neoliberalism.html 2 December 2005.

3 On this point see Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 129.

4 For a seminal treatment of this dualist vision, see Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1981).

course, momentous implications for the academic curriculum here: if it seeks to rigidly maintain boundaries between disciplines it will end up simply perpetuating the paradigm of modernity and, by extension, the neoliberal ethos.

Rather, we need to reclaim an older, pre-Enlightenment vision of the humanities that is not dependent upon this paradigm. Viewing reality as essentially one, as a reflection of a single ontological order, this vision seeks to integrate the various spheres of this order through a continuous focus on its *telos* – its purpose.[5] The details of this order and of its telos may differ. But the very fact of conceiving the order in such a fashion (as single and with a *telos*) lends an integrative character to the way we conceive of the various academic disciplines. In this older vision, disciplines are organically related to each other because they speak to one reality and see themselves in relation to a purpose.

An immediate objection needs to be addressed here. Is it an act of faith to conceive of reality as single and having a purpose? Does it necessarily imply a particular theological view of the world? These questions are somewhat misplaced. The fact is that any mutual interaction takes place on the assumption that we inhabit a single reality. How we interpret that reality is of course another matter. And we all, no matter how disparate our views on this may be, give some purpose to that reality (even nihilism is inversely a type of purpose we give to reality). So we all, in fact, implicitly proceed upon the assumption that reality is one and purposeful. In the older vision of humanities, this unity and purpose is at the forefront of its approach. Its theology is in your face, so to speak. In the post-Enlightenment conception, ontology and *telos* are put on the back-burner – its theology is hidden. *But, importantly, this does not make it any less theological at heart.*[6] A dualist paradigm is also informed by a particular view of reality, of causality, of time and space but typically does not enunciate its theological presuppositions in this regard. And the fact that they are hidden means they remain undefined. In contrast, the fact that the older vision of humanities puts these presuppositions at the forefront means they are not only acknowledged, but compel all disciplines to speak to these presuppositions, fostering a view of knowledge as unitary and purpose-driven.[7]

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5 For a description of this order and this *telos* – the gist of which we will shortly sketch in this essay – see Danie Goosen, "Die teoretiese lewe: perspektiewe vanuit die Tradisie", *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe* 51, no. 4 (2011): 490–506.

6 I am using "theology" here in its broadest sense as a conception of reality.

7 I believe that contemporary cross-disciplinarity is really a manifestation of this *de facto*, implicit assumption of unity of order and purpose in academia, but the very fact that it does not consciously proceed from such an awareness means that it remains undefined.

Various consequences follow from this. Speaking consciously to a single reality the disciplines of the humanities are innately universal. And in taking stock of this reality they are by nature contemplative. In seeking to actualize the *telos* behind this reality, they cultivate the virtues. And in achieving that *telos*, they generate wisdom.

These four elements – universality, contemplation, the virtues and wisdom – are radically transformed when subjected to a dualist paradigm. Universality folds in the face of identity politics, contemplation is exchanged for the commodification of reality, virtues are neglected in favour of rights, and wisdom is replaced by information overload. This essay will elaborate these contrasts, arguing that a humanities programme that privileges identity politics, commodification, rights, and information is premised on a reduced, quantitative view of human nature, providing a fertile environment for the extension of the neoliberal ethos. In contrast, humanities studies that invert these values, that fundamentally sees the "self" in the "other" (universality), that focuses on self-realization rather than academic production (contemplation), that has a more profound view of the self's capabilities (virtues), that focuses on texture rather than use (wisdom) offers us alternative ways of approaching reality – ways that challenge rather than facilitate the neoliberal ethos. But, in order to better understand the historical transition, I will begin by providing a fuller picture of the worldview that informed a premodern humanities and its eventual eclipse by the sensibilities that informed modernity.

2 The Humanities and Changing Worldviews: A Sketch

Danie Goosen argues that a key characteristic of the modern/postmodern university is to emphasise "practical", instrumental concerns and questions as opposed to the "theoretical life" cultivated by the traditional perspective – the perspective of the premodern university. Although universal in conception,[8] in the West – and in the way Goosen uses it in his essay – this perspective is associated with the thought of Plato, Aristotle and the respective schools that developed in their wake – but in particular the synthesis of this entire

8 This universality of tradition is captured in a remark attributed to St. Augustine: "Wisdom uncreate, the same now as ever was and ever will be." But in teaching this wisdom tradition takes on different forms suitable to time and place. See Kenneth Oldmeadow, *Frithjof Schuon and the World of Tradition: A Study of Traditionalism and the Perennial Philosophy* (MA Thesis: University of Sydney, 1982), 82–85.

tradition by Thomas Aquinas.[9] By "theoretical life" Goosen means a focus on two distinct but interlinked concepts: *intellectus* and *ratio*. *Intellectus* is the intuitive apprehension of reality as is. It is the awe-inspiring, ineffable encounter with reality in itself, that is, the "that-ness" (*dat*) or "being-there" (*daar-wees*) of reality. *Ratio* refers to that aspect of thought which reflects on the nature of this "that-ness," that is, on the "what" (*wat*) of reality.

According the Goosen, in the traditional perspective the "that-ness" is always greater than the "what." The "what" can never fully encompass the being-there of reality. Human beings are pre-eminently located between the "that-ness" and the "what," between the intuitive insight into the supreme reality (Plato's "Good", Aristotle's "Unmovable Mover", Aquinas's "God") and the capturing of this reality in *ratio*. The theoretical life is a cultivation of this "in-between" and it the highest endeavour to which human beings can aspire.[10]

Why does tradition favour the theoretical life over the practical? This is because of the traditional experience of reality. This reality is experienced as an *esse intensivum* (intensive existence), that is, as an independent reality that is solely due to itself and does not require any external support in order to be. If it required such external support, then it would be an incomplete reality and so cannot be regarded as sheer intensive existence.

Supreme reality is also perfectly simple in its self-existence. To be brought into being by other forces adds degrees of compositeness. Mortal beings are themselves composite, being composed of both the "that-ness" and the "what," or the self and the non-self. Supreme reality is pure Self. And so the theoretical life is one that strives to be in agreement with this reality and is characterized by the intensity of its relationship to that Self. The practical is characterized by a greater distance from that Self and hence by lesser intensity. The practical, though, is still integral to the realization of the theoretical. It is through the exercise of practical virtues such as prudence (*prudentia*) that makes possible the theoretical life. The highest goal of the theoretical life is the realization of wisdom (*sapientia*) while simultaneously realizing prudence, the highest virtue in practical life. *Prudentia* is necessarily an "in-between" virtue, partaking in both spheres. To be truly wise we need to be prudent.[11]

According to Goosen, the traditional relationship between the theoretical and the practical life was annulled with modernity. The practical started assum-

9 Goosen, "Teoretiese lewe," 492.

10 Goosen, "Teoretiese lewe", 492–493.

11 Goosen, "Teoretiese lewe", 493–494.

ing a greater importance to the detriment of the theoretical.[12] It was also to the detriment of "contemplation" which formed such a fundamental aspect of the theoretical life.

And so *intellectus* and *ratio* was separated, and then *ratio* itself – as the inquiry into the nature of things – came to be considered as increasingly problematic. In postmodernity, especially, things are deemed to be pliable and constantly constructed. There is no foundation, no fundamental nature. The modern human being sees himself or herself as without a given nature, and only possesses one to the extent that they construct it for themselves. Modernity not only privileges the practical, it also reduces the theoretical to the practical. The practical now takes on the quality of "redemption." For Marx, Goosen notes, the challenge now was not to interpret the world but to *change* it. In turn, the practical life has now lost its classical import (as the cultivation of practical virtues) and is now seen in a purely instrumental and pragmatic way. Knowledge, as Bacon observed a long time ago, is the exercise of power.[13]

We may infer that the humanities developed in the shade of this modern outlook reinscribes such instrumentalism, becoming focused on practical concerns such as "relevance." As such, it represents a particularly modern reading of the humanities with all the metaphysical baggage (that is, a secular view of time, space and causality) that this implies.

The contrast between traditional and modern humanities is brought sharply into focus in Goosen's discussion of ecstatic ontology. In tradition reality was experienced as an ecstatic event. That is, it was an event in which the parts of reality reached out to the whole in an ecstatic manner. This perspective in turn was predicated on a correlation between the nature of desire and the nature of reality. In tradition, desire is characterized by an ecstatic component that reaches from the lowest to the highest, from immanent, earthly reality to a transcendental, heavenly one. But in order to realize this transcendental, ecstatic condition, desire must be focused on this higher goal. Without such a transcendental focus – when it becomes an arbitrary acting out of itself – then human beings either become indifferent to it (regarding it as an object just like any other) or they seek its fulfillment in an unrestricted fashion (with the restlessness and animosity this brings). Goosen notes that this loss of a transcendental focus and its accompanying problems are symptomatic of the postmodern condition.[14]

12 In the university today this is typified by a stress on marketing, competitiveness, networking and so forth, Goosen, "Teoretiese lewe", 495.

13 Goosen, "Teoretiese lewe," 495–496.

14 Goosen, "Teoretiese lewe," 496–498. Goosen says that the modern and late modern iso-

Goosen's reflection on desire also speaks directly, I believe, to the necessarily transformative role of the humanities in the traditional perspective. It is the proper engagement with desire, and with the senses on which desire necessarily depends and from which it emanates, which engenders ecstasy and self-realization – a realization that is possible because it is seen to be in concord with reality. The study of humanities thus becomes a passionate, personally transformative engagement with reality.

Goosen's historical reflection is, further, an invitation to seriously ponder the *grounds* for why things are the way they are. He alert us to the fact that "the way things are" are not inevitable, operating as they do on assumptions informed by a particular view of reality, a particular theology. There are other theologies, other claims on reality, that offer visions of self-realization and the "good life" (*bona vita*) that do not reside in a quantitative fulfillment.[15] These alternative visions, of course, have implications for the way we see the university. Universities can either create the possibilities for the exploration and realization of these alternative visions, or they can narrow the ground for such exploration and confine themselves to the practical. In Goosen's view, the underlying dissatisfaction expressed by academics on the state of the university today is really an unspoken concern about the now lost *theoretical* (as in the "theoretical life") nature of the university. The critical challenge for universities today is to bring this concern to the forefront, to resurrect the theoretical: "In the absence of a connection to the theoretical, the university will still be able to describe itself as a productive member of the knowledge-industry, but hardly as a 'university'."[16] It follows that the set of questions asked of and by the study of the humanities in a university which places the theoretical life at the fore

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lation of theory from practice and of both from the ecstatic relationship, goes in tandem with a process whereby facts are isolated from values, the rational from the ethical, and that which "is" from that which "ought" to be. These binaries now exist in a state of tension with each other, Goosen, "Teoretiese lewe," 504. Goosen's perspective may be instructively compared with that of Asad's for whom myth, as developed in modernity, feeds into a number of binaries that pervade secular discourse: belief and knowledge, reason and imagination, history and fiction, symbol and allegory, natural and supernatural, sacred and profane. See Asad, *Formations*, 23.

15 It needs to be added here that these alternative visions should not be mistaken as nostalgia for premodern forms of life. Rather, as Wael Hallaq puts it, "[Our] invocation of historical moral capital does not amount to an attempt to restore premodern practices and institutions but rather to draw upon a conception of the world that features the virtues and competence of moral instruction," Wael Hallaq, *The Impossible State* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 14.

16 Goosen, "Teoretiese lewe," 505.

is considerably different to one where the humanities, as a logical product of its inscription into the modern project, starts serving certain instrumental purposes.

I believe that Goosen's sketch brings to the fore certain fundamental features of tradition which are crucial to explore in relation to the humanities. The pure "that-ness" of reality speaks to a universal human quest premised on a universal view of human nature; the theoretical life is defined by the continual contemplation of this "that-ness"; the experience of this "that-ness" requires a qualitative exploration of life that is vitally tied to the cultivation of virtues; it is in relation to this "that-ness" that self-realization takes place, culminating in wisdom. I will now further take up these traditional themes of universality, contemplation, virtues and wisdom and contrast them with what I consider to be opposing themes engendered by modernity's privileging of the "practical life."

3 Universality versus Identity Politics

I think we are compelled to proceed on the principle that every expression is a universal expression. What does this mean? We need to accept that if mutual intelligibility is at all possible – if human beings can understand one another (and if they cannot in principle understand one another, discourse and persuasion – as well as this article itself! – would be meaningless) – then we have to accept that the locus of every individual is simultaneously a universal locus. We speak in and to a common reality and we assume that our every statement can in principle be understood by the "other" – namely, everything which is outside our "self." This is the basis of our sociality.

This potential understanding by the other is an empathetic understanding. It is undergirded by the understanding that the other is capable of entering our perspective, is capable of walking in our moccasins, as the famous proverb has it. And so the other can be persuaded by us, can be transformed by us. Equally, we can be persuaded and transformed by the other. In principle the other is us and we are the other.

In contrast to this universalism, identity politics assumes that we speak from multiple realities, from our own identities.[17] From this perspective, our realities

17 Our employment of the term "identity politics" resonates somewhat with a definition provided by Sonia Kruks. She says: "What makes identity politics a significant departure from earlier, pre-identarian forms of the politics of recognition is its demand for recognition

and identities are necessarily in competition with one another, and so "we" constantly set ourselves up against the "other." We need to assert "our" reality among and against those "other" realities. It is not assumed that the other can enter our perspective, can be persuaded and transformed by us, or that we can be changed by the other. Rather, to use a metaphor,[18] our own reality is part of a "marketplace" of identities and realities, and so our goal should be to "sell" as much of our identity as we can, to gain as much "market share" as we can.[19]

The South African debate around non-racialism versus multi-racialism provides an instructive instance of the universalism-identity politics divide. Robert Sobukwe, founder of the Pan-Africanist Congress, encapsulates a universalist approach when he famously said:

> The structure of the body of man provides evidence to prove the biological unity of the human species. All scientists agree that there is no "race" that is superior to another, and there is no "race" that is inferior to others. The Africanists take the view that there is only one race to which we all belong, and that is the human race. In our vocabulary therefore, the word "race", as applied to man, has no plural form.[20]

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on the basis of the very grounds on which recognition has previously been denied: it is *qua* women, *qua* blacks, *qua* lesbians that groups demand recognition. The demand is not for inclusion within the fold of "universal humankind" on the basis of shared human attributes; nor is it for respect "in spite of" one's differences. Rather, what is demanded is respect for oneself *as* different," quoted in Cressida Heyes, "Identity Politics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2012 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2012/entries/identity-politics/. We say somewhat because for us identity politics is not only used on grounds which were previously denied, but also on grounds which were previously affirmed such as racial supremacy, for example. The salient feature is the setting up of the "self" (or the group as this self) against the "other" and, implicitly or explicitly, not allowing this other into the "self."

18 This is perhaps more than a metaphor, though. Identity politics is premised on quantification, on getting *as much* of purchase as possible in a constructed public sphere. As such, it shares the same nature as neoliberalism.

19 Alisdair MacIntyre recognizes this well when he notes that "emotivists" (and identity politics is certainly one form of emotivism) see other people as means to their own ends, not ends in themselves. He notes that for the emotivist, "[q]uestions of ends are questions of values, and on values reason is silent; conflict between rival values cannot be rationally settled. Instead one must simply choose – between parties, classes, nations, causes, ideals," MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 25.

20 Robert Sobukwe, "Inaugural Speech," Convention of the Africanists, April 1959, South

This view of race challenged the then multi-racial approach of fellow liberation organization, the African National Congress. The multi-racial approach, while indeed asserting the equality of all races, still explicitly recognizes race as a valid category and thus implicitly fosters a problematic identity politics. Sobukwe brilliantly and prophetically[21] recognizes when, in the same speech, he continues:

> Against multi-racialism we have this objection, that the history of South Africa has fostered group prejudices and antagonisms, and if we have to maintain the same group exclusiveness, parading under the term of multi-racialism, we shall be transporting to the new Africa these very antagonisms and conflicts.[22]

For Sobukwe and the Africanists, race had no universal reality. Of course, talking about race was critical and important precisely because people "identified" themselves as members of particular race and, beyond mere pragmatic usage, attributed a pseudo-ontological status to their race. But the whole point of Sobukwe's discourse was precisely to subvert this status, to show that it was

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Africa History Online, http://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/robert-sobukwe-inaugural-speech-april-1959.

21 Sobukwe's statement is prophetic: there is little doubt that in post-Apartheid South Africa we see the continuation and indeed the re-inscription of colonialism and Apartheid's racial ordering. Indeed, after a hiatus in the struggle years where the issue of race was dealt with in a very wary and careful way, there appears to be a re-emergence of an uncritical use of these racial categories and the prejudices that they convey. Na-iem Dollie has expressed a similar consternation with the use of such categories. In a lecture on the legacy of his mentor Neville Alexander, Dollie says: "[Alexander] used his refined understanding of people and their interests to propose a new way of appreciating humanity and the educational systems that would strengthen our one-ness, which is one of the many reasons why, for much of his adult life, he opposed the idea that, as a species, we are different 'races.'" While he accepted that racism exists as a sociological phenomenon and as a political tool of social engineering, his philosophy was based on the premise that our evolutionary origins have a singularity, despite the multiple and small genetic permutations that have subsequently occurred within the human race. It is not only a point of major irritation for me to read references to 'races' in the White Paper on Higher Education, but its continued use, as if it is a scientific fact, flies in the face of biological evidence, Na-iem Dollie, "Alternative Education in South Africa?" (Second Annual UNISA Memorial Lecture Series on Neville Alexander, 9 October 2014), 8–9. Online: http://www.unisa.ac.za/news/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Keynote-address-by-Na-iem-Dollie.pdf.

22 Sobukwe, "Inaugural Speech".

of no ontological consequence, that it had no real being. This was not a naïve dismissal of physical differences between human beings and the perceptions these engender – but ultimately we needed to transcend those differences. To be African in the Africanist perspective was not to be a member of a race: on the contrary, it meant precisely the opposite. Anyone who had disowned an identity politics based on race – be they so-called coloured, white, Indian or ethnically black – was truly African. "African," of course was an identity – after all, we need identities – but it was a universally rooted one as opposed to the particularizing one of race. For Sobukwe we can only challenge prejudices based on race by dismantling the concept itself; we can only attain a true universalism by undermining the whole notion of particularized racial identity altogether, even if this is constituted on the basis of equality.[23]

I believe that identity politics, whether based on race or other forms of particularized identity, proceeds on a diminished view of human nature. It implicitly defines the human being as a political animal whose primary goal is the preservation of his or her self-interest. The foregrounding of politics is historically a result of emerging secular sensibilities, especially in the wake of the Enlightenment, and consequently new ideas of causality, time, space, and the nature of the self.[24] The self is no more seen as an arena to be cultivated, to be taught virtues, to be purified, capable of moving from "lower" to "higher." On the contrary, given the new concepts of causality, time and space, there is no purpose – no *telos* – to such movement. Why, it would be asked, should the self require cleansing? It is what it is.

Such a perspective – aside from other difficulties[25] – immediately closes off a potentially rich world of the self. Traditionally, the cultivation of virtues opens up new dimensions of the self, new avenues of sensing, perceiving and

23 Particular identities, such as those based on race translate into identity politics and the "other" remains the other; universal identities in principle see the other as part of the self.

24 See Talal Asad, *Formations*, Chapter One.

25 The implicit assumption of incompatible subjectivities that drives identity politics naturally brings the issue of relativism into the fray. And Frithjof Schuon, for instance, has stated the classic objection to relativism in this way: "The axiom of relativism is that 'one can never escape from human subjectivity'; if this is the case, the statement itself possesses no objective value, but falls under its own verdict. It is abundantly evident that man can escape subjectivity, for otherwise he would not be man; and the proof of this possibility is that we are able to conceive of both the subjective and the surpassing of the subjective," Frithjof Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence. A New Translation with Selected Letters*, trans. Mark Perry, Jean-Pierre Lafouge, and James S. Cutsinger; ed. James S. Cutsinger (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2009), 6.

consequently acting in the world.[26] These new dimensions and avenues are not cultivated for the sake of novelty itself; they are cultivated in order to bring durable happiness (*eudaemonia*) to the human being. The reductionist view of the self, fostered by modernity, forecloses, at the very beginning, the exploration of the self's possibilities. To adapt Talal Asad's phrase, modernity is only interested in its own music, not in any other, perhaps more satisfying, modes of musical expression.[27]

The reductionist view of human nature produces a fragmented, free-floating individual whose ties to a community are purely instrumental. The individual, at the end of the day, is out for himself or herself, concerned with his or her own survival. This diminished view of human nature cannot, unfortunately, be overturned by remaining within the paradigm of modernity. It requires a different view of human nature altogether. And this explains why Marxism, although in evident opposition to neoliberalism, cannot fundamentally overturn it – it remains inscribed in a materialist view of human nature, a view that is also the impetus for neoliberalism. The real opposition to neoliberal dominance must come from those with a more profound understanding of the human being, of the role of virtues, who are versed in other forms of music, so to speak.[28]

However, the view of a human being as a disaggregated, fragmented individual is sustained by strong currents within the humanities itself. As Abdal Hakim Murad notes, modern philosophies, especially postmodernism:

> repudiates the possibility of mutual understanding and of human sociality … Others [exist] as a constellation of alien mysteries which lie beyond our comprehension or any possibility of traditional ethical engagement … The contemporary world is one of atoms which spring apart, while acknowledging a social contract maintained for reasons of utility … The modern university is the shrine of this disaggregated human subject, driven increasingly by commercial sponsorship.[29]

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26 For a marvellous example of this among women mosque movements in contemporary Egypt, see Saba Mahmood, "Agency, Performativity and the Feminist Subject," in *Pieties and Gender*, ed. Lene Sjorup and Hilda Romer Christensen, International Studies in Religion and Society 9 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2009), 13–46.

27 Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1993), 193.

28 See Jeremy Seabrook, "Stop Capitalism defining Human Nature", *The Guardian*, 24 September 2009. Online: http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cif-green/2009/sep/24/capitalism-human-nature.

29 Abdal Hakim Murad, *Commentary on the Eleventh Contentions* (Cambridge: The Quilliam Press, 2012), 47.

In a manner that simulates the processes of identity politics, different disciplines within the humanities are keen to protect their turf, keen to carve out their market share. This occurs both ideologically – in, say, protecting religious studies from theology, or philosophy from both – or institutionally – protecting one's own department when the going gets rough. This is to an extent natural and expected, but it is also artificial. The divisions between the disciplines as we know them today are largely informed by the dualist mindset of modernity which has pre-eminently separated the natural from the human, and – in the wake of its logic of disaggregation – separated the human being into aesthetic, economic, political, and other components. Rather than being seen as an organic unity, the humanities (and more generally knowledge) comes to be seen as a sum of component parts.[30]

Such disaggregation, based as it is on individualism and competition, is conducive to a neoliberal ethos that seeks to extend market rationality in all spheres of life. But it is an ethos that undermines the humanities themselves as the demands of the market increasingly confine and restrict the influence and applicability of its disciplines. The humanities constantly find that they have to justify their relevance in the face of these demands. Yet it is ironically the humanities based on an Enlightenment-derived model of human nature that are themselves largely responsible for this state of affairs. If we are to truly reassert the value of the humanities, we need to interrogate this model and seek more profound models of human nature – models which have a rich pedigree in classical and religious traditions.[31] These models are by nature anti-quantitative: a human being is not defined by the sum of his or her parts. Rather, he or she is driven by a *telos*, namely that of self-realization. As a result, knowledge (and of course the humanities) cannot, in essence, be compartmentalized as each act of knowledge is a step towards the fulfilment of this *telos*. The quest for self-realization presupposes an integrated view of reality and, consequently, knowledge.

30 MacIntyre notes that in the Athenian world, politics, philosophy and drama were conjoined together – they were much more "intimately related" than in our own: "Politics and philosophy were shaped by dramatic form, the preoccupations of drama were philosophical and political, philosophy had to make its claims in the arena of the political and the dramatic." Further: "The Athenians had not insulated, as we have by a set of institutional devices, the pursuit of political ends from dramatic representation or the asking of philosophical questions from either," MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 161. The opposition between art and life is a premise of modernity (211).

31 Platonic and Aristotelian for example.

4 Contemplation and Commodification

The quest for self-realization presupposes another condition: a contemplative posture towards knowledge. Knowledge is not to be produced and consumed merely for the sake of production and consumption; even less is it to be an instrument serving the ends of a purported knowledge economy. Rather, knowledge needs to be reflected upon with a view to this self-realization.

This contemplative posture, of course, runs against the grain of much of the current academy where the focus is precisely on production (the incessant publish or perish), on being cited (for National Research Foundation ratings, for instance), on being seen as "relevant" to the knowledge economy – in other words, all processes which foster the commodification of knowledge and, by extension, which foster a neoliberalism whose very lifeblood is such commodification. It takes a brave (or foolish) academic to stand against this tide and assert the more contemplative posture. One such academic was prominent University of Chicago sociologist Philip Rieff. Writing about Rieff's withdrawal from public life in his later years, Jeremy Beer notes:

> Rieff's withdrawal from public life was pregnant with meaning. Rieff could easily have spent his last three decades collecting the usual emoluments and honors of academia, cultivating a school of disciples, perhaps retiring into a position as a well-heeled senior fellow at a prominent think tank. But dropping out was Rieff's counter-countercultural strategy. Whatever else its motivations, it was a singularly honest decision. In *Fellow Teachers*, he noted that Kierkegaard knew that "the one thing" that "would be unambiguously superior to any and all published workings-through" was "a piety of silences." Not wanting to be "played in the ideas market," Rieff wondered whether the "best we can do is to practice the art of silence, specially in this period of over-publication and shouting controversialists." The rest of his life provided his answer.[32]

Critical to cultivating the contemplative posture, cultivating this "art of silence," is to first listen before producing, to first read before writing, to first look to what has gone before acting on the urge to produce something "original." Of course, all good academic output in the humanities has these elements present via a thoughtful theoretical framework and a solid literature review. But what

32 Jeremy Beer, "Pieties of Silences", *The American Conservative*, http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/pieties-of-silence/.

I mean here is a deeper sense of listening, reading and mastering a tradition of knowledge where these activities are not merely the prerequisites of academic output, but indeed the primary reason for engaging the humanities, with scholarly production in the form of articles and books an important byproduct, but a byproduct nonetheless, of such engagement. The focus, in other words, is on a disciplined contemplation of knowledge for the purpose of self-realization; not on output for the sake of output or marketability as in a paradigm that commoditizes knowledge.

An excellent example of such listening, reading and mastering can be found in the "Great Books" curriculum which operates at some colleges in America. The idea is to counter the narrow specialization that reigns in contemporary humanities by inducting students in a broader based curriculum, covering not only a range of disciplines in the humanities but fundamental ones in the sciences as well. More to the point, students are inducted into a rigorous reading regimen covering key primary texts of a particular tradition (mainly the Western tradition although the Eastern tradition is also taught). While academic papers and so forth are of course required, the key emphasis appears to be on "listening" to that tradition.[33]

Another example in this regard, evidenced in West Africa amongst others, is the classical Islamic tradition of commentary. In this tradition, a basic text in a particular subject is taught to students with the commentary provided by a teacher. In time, a particular teacher's commentary will be written down and used by other teachers in their commentaries on the basic text. In time their commentaries may be written down and so forth. In all this, the basic text is maintained and various dimensions are impressed on the student through these multiple commentaries. The aim is to induct the student into a mastery of the text, into a thorough contemplation of its content, into relating this content to the broader Islamic tradition and to realize the *telos* of this tradition via this absorption in the text. The commentaries – the academic output – are an aide to this fundamentally contemplative endeavor, not ends in themselves.[34]

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33 There are various colleges in America that offer a curriculum based on the "Great Books" curriculum. One such institution is the Thomas Aquinas College in California which offers the motivation behind its choice of curriculum at the following link: http://www.thomasaquinas.edu/a-liberating-education/great-books.

34 The contemplative endeavour, it needs to be noted, is not simply the means to realize the end, namely the *telos*. The very act of contemplation participates in this *telos*. As students read, listen and master the text, they are participating in the kind of life cultivated by this *telos*. This echoes an Aristotelian ethic. As Alisdair MacIntyre observes: "… Aristotle takes

However, such a pedagogy also presupposes the cultivation of virtues. Students must imbibe the values of courage, justice, truth, charity, and so forth as part of the contemplative endeavour. They must, in other words, learn to become contemplative by challenging their lower natures and rising to their higher ones. And this they can only do via the practice of virtues. The realization of the *telos* is inconceivable without such practice.

5 Virtues and Rights

Given that virtues are taught and learnt through habituation – thus requiring institutional arrangements – they foreground the centrality of a community. It is within and through the community that self-realization takes place. As such, as observed by Danie Goosen, the community itself should focus on fostering the good – a good that is ultimately rooted in transcendence. We may say that a community should itself be driven by the *telos* that animates the life of its members. But, continues Goosen, modernity's self-understanding has meant that such a transcendental perspective is discarded in favour of one that does not only not see individuals as participating in the highest good, but indeed sees individuals as essentially at war with each other. He writes:

> As a result of [this] Hobbesian anthropology, people also share the fact that they are in unavoidable conflict with one another. If people are individuals who are primarily focused on survival, then this means that their relationships by definition exclude one another. Every person is seen as a wolf by the other. In a nutshell, no more do people participate in a communal striving for the highest good, but are rather seen as standing in each other's way.[35]

It is not difficult to see why such individualism is conducive to capitalism. The rugged individualist is after all the capitalist archetype. But more than that, in the absence of virtues – an absence caused by the erosion of community – the individual seeks the immediate satisfaction of his or her needs and wants, facilitating a culture of consumerism.

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the telos of human life to be *a certain kind of life*; the *telos* is not something to be achieved at some future point, but in the way our whole life is construed," MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 163.

35 Danie Goosen, "Tussen katedrale en kastele: Oor die teologies-politieke probleem," *HTS Teologiese Studies/HTS Theological Studies* 65, no. 1 (2009): 295–304, here 297.

But there is another consequence of this erosion: to prevent individuals from engaging in the war of "all against all" the state steps in and invests the individual with statutory rights. It is the state, through the application of its law, that separates individuals from getting at each other through the enforcement of these rights. Legal rights now have the eminence previously accorded to cultivated virtues.

But the eminence accorded to statutory rights (and by extension human rights), as we have seen, is based on a particular anthropology of the human being. It is, as we have indicated before, an impoverished anthropology based on a limited view of human nature. It is a view that sees the human being purely in material terms and in this very materiality fosters a fetish for quantification that is conducive to the neoliberal ethos.

The classical Aristotelian-Christian tradition of virtues in contrast offers a richer anthropology, a different conception of happiness than that which is on offer when a human being is conceived as a mere rights bearing subject. Alisdair MacIntyre sees Jane Austen as "the last great effective imaginative voice of the tradition of thought about, and practice of the [classical tradition of] virtues I have tried to identify."[36] For MacIntyre, she restores a teleological perspective to virtues as her heroines "seek the good through seeking their own good in marriage." In pursuing this good, her heroines have to learn to cultivate virtues such as amiability and constancy. But as a Christian it is important that this be genuine amiability, for example, and not simply the appearance of such. And so, according to MacIntyre, Austen does not simply confirm the Aristotelian-Christian tradition of virtues, she extends it by unmasking its counterfeits. This aspiration for genuine virtue may even make at least one of her heroines appear charmless. MacIntyre observes:

> But Fanny [Brice's] lack of charm is crucial to Jane Austen's intentions. For charm is the characteristically modern quality which those who lack or simulate the virtues use to get by in situations characteristic of modern life … And the charm of an Elizabeth Bennett or even of an Emma may mislead us, genuinely attractive though it is, in our judgment on their character.[37]

But Fanny Brice is not looking for the glib, quantitatively based happiness that such charm may foster, but a differently textured one:

36 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 223.

37 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 225.

> Fanny is charmless; she has only the virtues, the genuine virtues, to protect her, and when she disobeys her guardian, Sir Thomas Bertram, and refuses marriage to Henry Crawford it can only be because of what constancy requires. In refusing she places the danger of losing her own soul before the reward of gaining what for her would be the whole world. She pursues virtue for the sake of a certain kind of happiness and not for its utility.[38]

The humanities that privilege a rights discourse over virtues sacrifice a rich, deeply textured perspective – this "certain kind of happiness" – for one that is conducive to a neoliberal world that by its very logic turns against the humanities itself.[39]

6 Wisdom and Information Without Terminus

The notion of quantification is pre-eminently embodied in the deluge of information characteristic of contemporary modernity. We now, of course, have information at our fingertips on a scale unparalleled in human history. Yet closure on the fundamental questions of existence still eludes us. Should we gather more information till we arrive at such answers? Or should we acknowledge that such questions will by their nature elude us and information, if anything, has the valuable role of undermining any claims to certainty?

Both approaches, I think, are misplaced. The concept of "information" itself appears to be an outcome of the dualist mindset underpinning modernity. It represents what can be "known" quantitatively, as an act of the mind. The very claim that "more information" can help us "solve" these fundamental questions – or that it can undermine a presumed false certainty – is a peculiarly modern construction.

Wisdom – classically, to put things in their proper places – is not defined by such quantification. Rather than mind, wisdom presumes the engagement of the entire self in exploring the fundamental questions of existence. The act of exploring itself is an unfolding answer to the question posed. The existence of

38 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 225.

39 For how human rights discourse can facilitate neoliberalism see, for example, Michael Neocosmos, "Transition, Human Rights and Violence: Rethinking a Liberal Political Relationship in the African Neo-Colony," *Interface: A Journal for and about Social Movements* 3, no. 2 (2011): 359–399.

God, for example, in this traditional view is not so much a propositional question of belief but an exploration of a relationship. This harks back to an older, pre-epistemological vision of "belief," one captured Talal Asad. In his "Thinking about religious belief and politics" Asad argues that the commonplace conception of religion as belief is informed by profound political considerations. It is informed by a view of the self as sovereign, as having the innate right to "choose" what we want to believe. The historical duty of liberal democracy is ostensibly to protect this choice, to guarantee freedom of religion. In other words, liberal democracy is the neutral enabler of freedom of religion. But, argues Asad, the issue is more complex and more problematic than this. The whole notion of religion as a set of beliefs (as a set of propositions requiring assent) – in other words, as an epistemological formulation – is the product of modern sensibilities. Previously, *credere* – to believe – was an ethical act, a moral one. To believe (or to disbelieve, *infidelatis*) was to believe in a particular way, that is to remain loyal to a particular way of believing something. Disbelieving was not so much the denial of a proposition, but was disloyalty to that particular way of believing. This older view was a product of a different ordering of the senses. Asad uses a case study by Dorothea Weltecke to make this point:

> Thus Dorothea Weltecke, who has written on this subject, cites the case of Aude Fauré, a young peasant woman, who was brought before the Inquisition: she was unable, she said, to *credere in Deum*. What she meant by this, Weltecke points out, emerges from the detailed context: She took the existence of a God for granted. It was because, in her desperation, she couldn't see in the Eucharist anything but bread, and because she found herself struggling with disturbing thoughts about incarnation, that she had no hope of God's mercy. It is not clear that the *doctrine* of God's body appearing in the form of bread is being challenged here; what is certainly being expressed is her *anguished relationship* to him as a consequence of her own incapacity to see anything but bread. In short, it is not that our present concept of belief (*that* something is true) was absent in pre-modern society but that the words translated as such were usually embedded in distinctive social and political relationships, articulated distinctive sensibilities; they were first of all lived and only secondarily theorized.[40]

40 Talal Asad, "Thinking about Religion, Belief, and Politics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. Robert A. Orsi (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 46.

Following Asad's intervention, we can say that wisdom in this older view was not dependent on an "amount" of information – rather, it was the outcome of fidelity to a particular tradition, to a particular order of things, and living in that tradition as a whole self – mind, body, heart and soul – cultivated an awareness of why things were ordered in the way they were. The tradition, needless to say, was focused on the *telos*, self-realization, and so the wise person is simultaneously the self-realized person.

Asad's intervention, I believe, fundamentally alerts us to the issue of genealogy in the humanities: how what are commonly-accepted assumptions regarding individual choice, individual sovereignty, belief, and so forth are constructed out of peculiarly modern secular sensibilities generated by the Enlightenment paradigm. These assumptions are not natural or innate, although the dominance of liberal democratic ethos projects them to be so. But is it not the same ethos, with its focus on the primacy of the individual, which has created the conditions conducive for the various mutations of capitalism? We believe that this is indeed the case and it raises the critical question: If the humanities are to challenge the neoliberal paradigm, should it not be challenging the Enlightenment one as well? Our essay clearly implies that it should. However, this does not mean throwing the baby out with the bathwater and a caveat is necessary here.

7 Caveat: An Orientation, not an Adoption

This essay is not calling for an *adoption* of the pre-Enlightenment worldview. This is neither realistic nor even desirable. Rather it is a call for an *orientation* to that universe of thought, to consider an alternative way of approaching reality.

Now orientations occur all the time. Liberalism has oriented us to a particular worldview, postmodernism has challenged this orientation and in the process oriented us to a new worldview where reality is seen as constructed by interpretation, and decoloniality challenges the ethnocentrism of both, orienting us in turn to be more attuned to perspectives and worldviews from the non-West.

All these orientations, of course, contribute in a fundamental way to the constitution of the humanities as we know them today. Any other entry point into the field must meaningfully engage with the vast array and sheer value of insightful scholarship that these orientations have produced. Much of this essay, for example, resonates with the ideals of a liberal arts education associated with classic liberalism. And so while our entry point has problematized a link between classic liberalism and neoliberalism on the basis of being rooted

in the notion of the sovereign individual, this by no means implies that we conflate the two. Postmodernism, in turn, has crucially challenged the grand narrative of liberal modernity and its myth of progress. In spite of our view that it is still implicitly inscribed in the same notion of the sovereign individual, it has shown up the claims of liberalism to purported universality which in reality have very particular, more recent genealogies. And while our own entry point does not concur that this undermines the notion of universality per se, postmodernism's unmasking function is critical. Decoloniality is an important recent intervention that, in a more sustained way than post-structuralism, highlights the ethnocentrism of much liberal discourse. In looking at the non-West, it compels us to both take cognisance of the deficiencies of narrower Great Books programs and opens us to new programmes (including rich oral traditions) as well as, more overarchingly, new epistemologies and ways of being in general. So our entry points is in no way a dismissal of such other vantage points, but indeed needs to work through them in arguing the nuts and bolts of positions it adopts.

But all these orientations proceed, as we have indicated earlier, from implicit theologies, from particular ways of seeing the world and implicit assumptions of time, space, and causality. This is only natural. These theological foundations do not detract from the value contained in the critiques they generate though I have argued that we need to be aware of the way that neoliberalism can employ the same foundations for its own project.

In a similar vein, while the pre-Enlightenment worldview is necessarily theological – and a very explicit one at that – this theology should not obscure the value it has for current issues in the humanities, as this essay has broadly tried to sketch. We should look at this worldview in terms of the types of arguments it seeks to generate, without conflating this with an adoption of its theology. Of course, argument cannot be neatly separated from theology, whether in liberalism, postmodernism, decoloniality, or pre-Enlightenment thought. And indeed they should not be so separated. It is precisely the tension between theology and argument that shapes these worldviews and gives them their distinctive character. But they do *argue* their positions and I believe that it is at the interstices of argument that a rich interchange can take place. In the current academic framework, the pre-Enlightenment framework operates at the margins of discourse when compared to the other three. Ours is basically a plea for its *arguments* to be heard not a call for its worldview to be adopted.

8 Conclusion

The older vision of the humanities, as we have seen, presupposes a more integrative view of the disciplines within the humanities, given its unitary view of reality and *telos*. But this holds tremendous implications for disciplines outside the humanities as well. Science, technology and related disciplines are not the enemy. They are themselves instrumentalized and put into the service of the neoliberal worldview – a worldview that, as we said earlier, wishes to impose market rationality on all aspects of life. In foregrounding universality, contemplation, virtue, and wisdom an older vision holds out the possibility of an alternative way of engaging science and technology, an alternative way of engaging life for the many people who are discontented by the debilitating effects of neoliberalism, an alternative form of music, so to speak.

There is, of course, no question of romanticising the past here, no question of "going back." Rather, what is being proposed is, to use Goosen's phrase, "an alternative modernity."[41] It is a modernity that again puts at the forefront questions which a secular, neoliberal perspective, with its quantitative bias, tends to avoid. These are questions such as: What is reality? What is the human being? What is the "good life"? What is happiness? In the older vision of humanities, these questions were not set aside as abstract and secondary. They were not neglected in favour of the more practical, the more useful, the more "relevant." On the contrary, they were the primary focus of the premodern university and the "practical" was shaped in the wake of how such questions were answered and explored.

But this older vision turns on a different conception of human nature. Human nature is more than a material substance, more than a sum of component parts. Universal at base, it is can be developed through virtues, cultivated by contemplation and can be realised, resulting in wisdom. And it is precisely the fact that it is rooted in such a quest that provides its best defense against modernity's levelling and even dismissal of such a nature. It cannot be refuted propositionally if it is not explored. After all, as intimated by MacIntyre and Asad, it is an exploration of texture. I believe that is in creating the space for such exploration, rather than in an ultimately futile effort to prove its "relevance" to a fluctuating neoliberal reality, that the flourishing of the humanities finally resides.

41 Goosen, "Katedrale en kastele," 296.

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