

Can the Humanities Still Humanize?

David Eaton
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“The humanities are ruined, and the universities full of crooks. Art in America is neglected, coddled, and buried under chatter. The right looks down on artists; the left looks down on everyone.”

This caustic bit of pessimism is from a 2005 interview by Robert Birnbaum with Camille Paglia in the online magazine *The Morning News*. Paglia is one of the great straight-shooters in contemporary academic circles and a provocative read.



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Though I share some of the pessimistic derision Paglia expresses regarding the perfidy of the “effete literati” (her term) that is now ensconced as the arbiters of cultural discernments and values, I remain hopeful that we can find our way out of the malaise of misguided misreadings regarding art, culture and the human condition. It is without question the humanities as understood and appreciated by those of a generation or two ago have undergone a radical transformation due to the pervasive and deleterious effects of postmodernism and political correctness. But this is not a new phenomenon.

In 1977, the American sociologist Peter L. Berger despaired over the condition of American universities as they evolved into “vast identity workshops,” where “for four years...students sit under trees with their shoes off and engaged in the not so arduous task of finding out who they really are.” For Berger, this kind of speculative navel-gazing had the effect of turning students into creatures of comfort rather than inquisitive seekers of higher knowledge.

In his book, *The Victim’s Revolution: The Rise of Identity Studies and the Closing of the Liberal Mind*, literary and film critic Bruce Bawer alludes to the stark contrast between John Stuart Mill and his advocacy of free speech as an essential characteristic of university culture, and neo-Marxist Herbert Marcuse, who called for “the withdrawal of toleration of speech and assembly” from groups and movements that didn’t advocate the leftist, progressive agenda.

Bawer views the deceit of Marcuse’s “repressive tolerance” vis-à-vis identity studies in the American academy as nothing less than “a betrayal, in the profoundest sense, of the promise of America,” and a contributing factor in the closing of the liberal mind, not to mention the ongoing assault on civil liberties. Speaking to the importance of studying the humanities and learning to think analytically and critically, and “to think for oneself,” while living in the university environment, Bawer writes:

It’s about experiencing wildly different products of the human Mind and spirit and making comparisons,

recognizing affinities, deciding what one likes and doesn't like...It's about encountering unfamiliar thoughts, weighing them against one another and against one's own observations of the world...It's about building an understanding of the history of humankind and of human art and thought and culture so that one develops, bit by bit, a radically heightened sense of how things got to be the way they are.

The assertion that Western-based humanities studies actually fail to "humanize" plays heavily into the critique that Western culture isn't all that it's cracked up to be. The idea that other non-Western cultures offer more humane alternatives in dealing with human proclivities has far more currency than previous generations could have imagined. Given the pervasive social problems that plague the Western cultural sphere in the new century, even the faintest whiff of idealism born of Western philosophical tenets is predictably met with derision and contempt. The notion of "the family of man" now seems like a shopworn platitude at best.

Divine Principle instructs that the juxtaposing of Eastern and Western philosophies can provide a comprehensive ideological framework for humankind to establish a culture of peace. In his speech, *God's Warning to the World*, Rev. Sun Myung Moon uses a musical analogy to demonstrate the importance of finding harmony between opposites — East and West specifically:

The union of people from East and West can be compared to playing the violin: Westerners are like the low notes of a violin while Asians are like the high notes. Americans walk with a long, swinging stride, but the Japanese walk lightly, taking small steps. More excitement is created when the two extremes unite to make one harmonized picture. We do not use the word harmony to describe primarily the unity of similar things. The most moving, beautiful harmony is created when extremes come together. The value of harmony lies in this unity and diversity."

Those of us who possess even a cursory understanding of the Chinese philosophical tome, the *I Ching*, understand that the Taoist axiom of harmonizing the polarities of *Yang* and *Yin* is one of its central tenets. The fusion of Taoist principles and Confucian ethics gives rise to rationales that guided the Chinese in matters of art and social governance. Confucianism is an "ethical-sociopolitical" philosophy that emphasized the importance of humane relationships in establishing an ideal culture. The cosmology of *Yang* and *Yin* is germane to both Confucian and Taoist doctrine and was considered elemental in humankind's pursuit of harmony and peace.

Western Christian values, according to Roger Scruton, provide the moral and ethical conviction that is indispensable in order for the grand vision of constitutional democracy to flourish — a view that the Founding Fathers surely envisioned. It is this faith conviction and "the shared meanings conveyed to us by our culture — meanings conveyed equally to the one who believes and the one who doubts," that makes our Judeo-Christian cultural patrimony significant. Scruton avers that we should view art, music and literature in much the same way that Friedrich Schiller did, as "the repository of moral knowledge." In this context, the humanities remain vital and the predilection to diminish and eviscerate them as the residue of a corrupt European culture born of a specific religious impulse is both counterproductive and regressive.

Since harmonization is a central goal of these two philosophies it is easy to understand the importance the Chinese placed on the role of music as a potential harmonizing agent. Moreover, the ancient Chinese believed music should embody and integrate the attributes of truth, beauty and goodness in a sublime balance of content and form. The moral and ethical aspects of that equation were not to be minimized because selflessness and moral integrity were seen as important virtues in creating a moral society. Like the Greeks in the West, the Chinese were well aware of the truth, beauty and goodness paradigm vis-à-vis the creation of music in particular and society in general.

Anti-essentialism — the belief there is no single, clear, universal, absolute experience that can provide anything remotely binding — is but another rationalization by academic progressives to diminish or dismiss any assertion that a metaphysical reality exists. Regarding the sphere of art, the anti-essentialist meme proffers that there are no common or intrinsic properties that can establish a concrete and logical deduction that there are, or may be, universal attributes that have universal appeal.

In fact, postmodern multiculturalists argue that the desire to discover truth — and live according to said truth — is but another attempt to hold power via intellectual superiority. As Allan Bloom averred, the "prideful knower" is a bane to the progressives who trade in undergraduate brainwashing. Those who grasp the value of "aesthetic education" (Schiller's term) as a means to understand human proclivities and fashion coherent and efficacious solutions to our social problems are viewed as the enemies of progressivism. As Russell Jacoby observes, the anti-essentialist mindset "at its best...represents familiar liberalism...being 'open' to 'new perspectives'...parading as something new," and "at its worst...represents the conservative nightmare — mindless relativism."

Postmodernism's disdain for that which is spiritual, sacred or religious in the arts belies a fundamental aspect of the human experience. This contempt for our cultural patrimony in relation to our spiritual lives

has resulted in the production of a great deal of third-rate art that passes for something meaningful for simply defying or destroying the “old contracts” of tradition and morality. When “universals” are derided for being tropes that are employed merely to attain political power, we are no longer engaging in enlightened rationale.



Because university culture has become a hotbed for groupthink and the mindless surrender to political correctness, we’ve lost our connection to the great traditions that can, and do, provide aesthetic education and spiritual renewal. This scenario contributes to the loss of our cultural patrimony. The aforementioned assertions of Rev. Moon, Paglia, Bloom, Scruton and Bawer point to the importance of the humanities in the process of developing well-informed, knowledgeable and ethical citizens from all cultural spheres.

Christopher Hitchens famously proclaimed that “religion poisons everything.” However, we need only to point to the great musical tradition born of the Judeo-Christian cultural sphere to prove that supposition to be untenable. A poignant irony

regarding Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s legacy is many secular progressives venerate him for the causes he championed — civil rights, equality, social justice, the content of one’s character as a measure of a person’s worth — but loathe the religious faith that fueled his vision and life’s work. They see him in sociological context rather than a religious one. It’s important to see both. Rev. Moon considered Dr. King to be among the greatest Americans precisely because of his faith conviction in dealing with “man’s inhumanity to his fellow man” and his courage in asserting moral fortitude.

David Hume’s examination of aesthetics in his *Four Dissertations* (1757) reinforces the idea that there are, in fact, universal “essences” that have impacted the human psyche for ages. And Scruton reminds us that Emmanuel Kant “situates the aesthetic experience and religious experience side by side” and goes as far as to suggest that it is the aesthetic experience that is “the archetype of revelation.” It could be said that by experiencing beauty via the cultural legacies of the past we become more conscious of our station in relationship to both God and the natural world, and when this occurs the true and complete essence of our being is affirmed. In this regard, the humanities have the potential to “humanize” and in so doing bring us out of our “endarkened” condition and into the enlightened mindset necessary to create a culture of peace.

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