

## Spiking the Canon

In 1941, three Harvard scientists bombarded a sample of mercury with fast-moving neutrons and, in the resulting nuclear reactions, converted some small fraction of those mercury atoms into isotopes of gold. In retrospect, I sometimes wonder how all the alchemists of past centuries would have felt if they had been brought back to witness such an experiment. Looking at the massive particle accelerator involved, would they feel foolish in seeing the technical complexity required to do something they thought they could achieve by simply mixing solutions together? Would they be disheartened to learn that the value of the gold produced is always far less than the cost of the energy used to produce it? Would they turn away in disgust, claiming that those few atoms of gold were just a cheap trick in comparison to the real transubstantiation that would have happened if they had only figured-out how to get their potions just right? Nobody knows, of course. The whole idea is just a thought experiment that will never happen, though another, similar dispute may be playing itself out now in a slightly-different form.

Within many academic institutions, one often intuits a subtle tension between the scientific departments and those of the humanities: a competition for funding, for students, for attention, for prestige. While I am here uninterested in belaboring the relative ascendancy of the former compared to the latter (rolling-out charts and graphs of college majors, tenure track positions, building development plans), I would like to point-out one retaliatory barb it appears to have frequently motivated – the claim that while the sciences do successfully answer the small questions in life (why does rain fall? how do cells replicate?), it is instead the humanities that answer the large ones (how should we live? what meaning is there in existence?). For a moment here, let us grasp this barb, lift it with care, and closely examine its legitimacy.

I wholeheartedly concur that the sciences have been impressively successful in answering many of the “small” questions in life. There is no need to spend several lifetimes enumerating them all; the fruits of such progress enable us all to enjoy a living standard unimaginable two centuries ago. But let us instead consider the second clause of the two and ask ourselves if the humanities have likewise answered the “big” questions. Have they? If they have, I must not have been paying very close attention in the humanities classes I have taken, for I have never heard enunciated, to the best of my recollection, those answers. True, I spent many hours sitting at one of several desks arranged in a circle when the questions were addressed and discussed, bouncing around the circumference with some greater or lesser continuity. But, in the end, what was achieved? To merely “grapple-with” questions without arriving at actual answers was about as meaningful as waiting in line for a roller coaster and then never getting on the ride.

Furthermore, many of the big questions do have answers of a sort which have been realized by (yes, all roads lead to Rome) hard-working scientists. The fundamental question of who we are was essentially answered by Alfred Russel Wallace and Charles Darwin in the 1850s, while the details comprise the enormous and expanding fields of cognitive science, neurobiology, and information theory. Where did everything come from? Ask quantum field theory, astrophysics, and cosmology. How do we decide what is right and what is wrong? Primatology, ethology, and evolutionary psychology. Even linguistics, which at first glance appears tangential to such fundamental concerns, has gotten in on the action, assisting modern analytic philosophy in categorizing many long-considered ponderables as pseudo-questions. “What is the meaning of life?” may have the syntactic structure of a legitimate question, but is actually about as worthwhile as contemplating, “Why don’t triangles eat breakfast?” Granted, all

of this work is not the instantaneous repudiation that occurred eighty years ago in Cambridge; the issues are vast and complex. But the relentless, ratcheting progress of science is being made on every front and is open to anyone who bothers to seriously inquire.

What, then, should we make of the other claims proffered in defense of the liberal arts – that they make students better thinkers, more comfortable with complexity, more capable in considering and communicating diverse perspectives? The simplest reply is to shift the burden of proof upon those making the claims and then wait for unbiased evidence, but we do not here have the luxury of such time. Let us instead reason by analogy. If you toured the athletic complex of any college or professional football team, you would see an enormous weight room filled with a vast array of plates, racks, and machines routinely used by dozens of individuals during nearly all waking hours. Why? Because weight training contributes to football performance and everyone knows it. Therefore, if studying the humanities likewise serves as valuable training for all intellectual endeavors in life, what should we expect to see regarding general participation in the high arts? Stoppard and Pinter plays in every urban and suburban theater, well-attended. Long waiting-lists for season tickets at symphony hall. Libraries struggling to keep enough copies of Tolstoy and Milton on the shelves. That we do not see any of these speaks for itself and when a professor of Renaissance literature claims their own studies *have* had such benefits for them and can likewise for everyone else, we are as unconvinced as when someone who is a lithe six-foot-eight tells us that anyone can dunk a basketball. The particular does not prove the general – the exception proves the rule.

And there is really no need for these justifications anyway. Seeking utilitarian value in the humanities has never been a wise strategy because that's not why we care about them. We care about them because we enjoy them. We enjoy movies and music and summer novels and funny stand-up stories, are sometimes even enriched by them. Is it unacceptable that such preferences do not conform to the “sophisticated” and “elevated” tastes of the professoriate? Well, too bad for them. But before they isolate their orthodoxy into extinction, I suggest they reflect for a moment upon the rationales often used in distinguishing their chosen works from the lowly rabble. There are too many such characteristics to take each in-turn, so we will focus on a single illustration, the claim that works of art with “depth” are somehow better than those deemed “shallow”. Is this true? By what syllogism? I will concede that the bubblegum backbeat of a Taylor Swift song is far simpler than the rapid modulations of a John Coltrane solo, but what is the bridge carrying you from that premise to the conclusion of the latter's superiority? If you are only going to state that you and your peers enjoy the Coltrane solo far more, that it resonates with you deeply while the pop song does not, we are back where we started. A thirteen-year-old bouncing around her bedroom is simply going to state the reverse. Consistently using words like “superficial” in a derogatory tone may trick others into assuming such works are therefore of little value, but the implication is a false equivalence.

Yes, I am aware this amounts to the relativism that worries so many. So be it. If the canonical towers tumble, perhaps it is because they were built on sand. At the very least, the admission that there is some truth here may provide a sense of relief to those who realize they no longer need to pretend liking what they have been told they should like but have never really liked in the first place, that they are instead free to make their own aesthetic choices, chart their own course, and follow that one wise precept given by Lord Chesterfield so many hundreds of years ago: “Enjoy pleasures, but let them be your own, and then you will taste them.”