HELEN SMALL

The Value of the HUMANITIES

THE VALUE OF THE HUMANITIES

HELEN SMALL

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of
Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries

First Edition published in 2013

Impression: 1

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

ISBN 978–0–19–968386–4

Printed in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

Contents

This page intentionally left blank

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge with gratitude the support received in writing this book from Pembroke College, Oxford, and the University of Oxford in the form of sabbatical leave. Its completion was enabled, sooner than would otherwise have been possible, by a nine-month Research Fellowship grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK). I am grateful to Vicky Drew, in the University of Oxford Humanities Division, for guiding me through the complexities of the applications process.

My greatest debt is to the people who have read the typescript in whole or in very large part and commented in detail: Isobel Armstrong, Stefan Collini, John Kerrigan, Michael Levenson, Bruce Robbins, and Sally Shuttleworth. I owe special thanks to Roger Crisp for casting a clear philosophical eye on the Introduction, Chapters 3 and 5, and the Conclusion; to Nicholas Shrimpton for giving me the benefit of his knowledge of Arnold for Chapter 2; and to Peter Robinson for a very close reading of Chapter 5; also to Peter Riviere for reading Chapter 1 with the experience of an anthropologist who chaired his department through the reorganization of Oxford University into a divisional arrangement placing his department (disputedly) in the Social Sciences rather than the Humanities. I am grateful to Wilfred Beckerman and Ken Mayhew for guiding my reading in the economic literature covered in Chapter 3; also to Richard Pring for help with the education literature. Chapter 4 was assisted by thought-provoking discussion in the early stages with Frances Cairncross and Hamish McRae, and Chapter 3 by detailed comments from David Keen on the penultimate draft. Individual chapters have benefited greatly from exposure to intelligent audiences in the following places: Cambridge University, the University of Charlottesville (Virginia), University of Chicago, Columbia University, Oxford University (Humanities Division,

Balliol MCR, and Jesus College English Society), Rutgers University, and the University of Delhi. Special thanks are due to my hosts on these occasions: Helen Cooper, Michael Levenson, Jim Chandler, Bruce Robbins, Sally Shuttleworth, Sumudu Watugala, Olivia Hanson, Kate Flint, Brinda Bose and Prasanta Chakravorty. I owe a particular debt to Michael Levenson as the inaugurating spirit of the 'Global Humanities' initiative—an ongoing series of conferences that aims to broaden perspectives on advocacy for the humanities beyond the immediate pressures of their national situations, and enable better-informed comparisons between them. If the imprint of those discussions on this book is not as visible as it might be, this is primarily because my focus is on the rhetorical and philosophical analysis of arguments rather than on institutional and political settings, which are subject to constant and sometimes rapid change. I have, nevertheless, learned much from exposure to different national conditions of debate, and very different kinds and degrees of pressure on the humanities to account for themselves.

Tim Gardam spotted the politically pressing nature of this subject early on, urged me to write about it, and continued to ask me the hard questions throughout. Such as it is, this book is for him, with love.

A small portion of the material in Chapter 3 (on Mill crying) appeared in '"Letting Oneself Go": John Stuart Mill and Helmuth Plessner on Tears', *Litteraria Pragensia* 22/43 *Towards a Lachrimology: Tears in Literature and Cultural History*, ed., Timothy Webb (July 2012), 112–27. The rest of this book is published here for the first time.

Introduction

The humanities might ideally find justification simply in our doing them. The act of justification has seemed to many humanities scholars to beg more than one question: that the value of their subject area is in question, and that the value is capable of being expressed in the mode of justification. The particular form of justification that involves articulating reasons why we should consider the higher study of the humanities (university teaching and research) a public good is a modern undertaking, driven by institutional, political, and economic pressures. Its practitioners can look for inspiration to two related genres with a distinguished history: 'the defence of poetry' and advocacy for 'the idea of the university'. The second of those genres is often now seen as imperilled, discredited, or (in its liberal forms at least) entirely defunct; the first is in rather better shape, but its concern is with only one aspect of the broad range of practices that have come to be grouped, since the 1940s, under the term 'humanities'. The value of the humanities certainly includes qualities associated with poetry and with liberal education, but the dual comparison highlights a problem of scale: any claims made for 'the humanities' must be rather less specific than in the case of poetry, rather more specific than in the case of the university. Given the difficulties, there is a serious temptation to insist that ongoing practical commitment is enough. And yet, there remain situations in which it is, obviously, necessary to respond to demands from government, and from university administrators who have to answer to government, that those who study and teach the humanities should be able to articulate the public value of their work: giving reasons why their subject area matters comparatively with other subject areas, and why it matters in its own right.

The hardest of those situations involves justifying the humanities' claim to a share of the public budget for research. This book was written against

a background of intense public debate about successive British governments' incremental retreat from the idea that the state should bear most of the economic cost of higher education. The state still pays, however, for research in the humanities, as it pays also for research in the social sciences and sciences; it underwrites the cost of every undergraduate's education, and it subsidizes graduate education for many. The most politically pressing question, at the point of writing, is what the state thinks it is paying for, in the case of the humanities, and whether the people who make decisions about public spending can be helped to recognize the distinctive nature of humanities scholarship (a more accurate word than research[1]), and distinctive contributions to the public good.[2]

The primary aim of the following pages is to examine the most commonly proffered reasons why the study of the humanities has distinctive purpose and value for us as individuals and as a society. My hope is that, insofar as the approach here is taxonomic, it may assist those tasked with making decisions about the respective claims on the public purse of incommensurable, but not incomparable, goods. (The Conclusion to this book explains in greater detail what I understand to be involved in the problem of comparing incommensurables.) In such practical decision-making circumstances, it is desirable, for the sake of accuracy and clarity, to understand that there are multiple distinct ways in which the humanities can be said to have public value, to be cognizant of the different senses of the term 'value' involved, the different contexts in which they hold good, and the quite different kinds of contribution made to the public good. The dual ambition of *The Value of the Humanities* is that it may, to borrow a phrase from the American critic Amanda Anderson (in turn reworking a title of Trollope), improve 'the way we argue now'—as academics, debating among ourselves, and as representatives of our universities or our disciplines facing outwards to the general public; also that it may improve the way 'we' as a society debate the public good of the humanities. However public the book's external prompts and hoped-for effects, I would not have written it had the subject not seemed attractively difficult. The taxonomic approach is, at base, a sign of someone trying to get her thoughts in order on a sub-

[1] See Stefan Collini, 'Against Prodspeak: "Research" in the Humanities', in his *English Pasts: Essays in History and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 233–51.

[2] See esp. the essays collected in Jonathan Bate (ed.), *The Public Value of the Humanities* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

ject no less tricky for being very well worn, and no less personally involving for having to do with the public good.

The following chapters identify five arguments for the value of the humanities that have been influential historically and that still have persuasive power. Each of them can yield more specific arguments, which I treat here as logically 'subordinate' or attendant, but which others might want to treat as distinctive and deserving of more notice in their own right. Together they offer a pluralistic account of value. One of my assumptions, throughout, has been that any persuasive account of the humanities' contribution to the public good has to be so plural, and that pluralism (at this level) does not entail incoherence. It is an understandable consequence of the political pressure to produce compelling justifications that many advocates for the public value of the humanities have sought to locate a single claim that will overpower all imagined resistance. Hence, in part, the popularity in recent years of the 'Democracy Needs Us' defence. There is no such all-silencing justification to be had: rather a number of distinct defences, each arising out of particular ways of thinking about value, purpose, and the nature of the implied opposition. A defence is, after all, a defence against a perceived threat, which may be a defined set of alternative needs and values (economic utility, for example; or an exclusive empiricism; or a narrowly quantitative estimation of human happiness), or it may be the more impersonal threat posed by an inhospitable economic climate in which all public goods are subject to much tougher demands for justification. In all these contexts, not just the last, the threat to the humanities will be one facet of a threat to the good working of the university as a whole. A defence that pits one area of intellectual activity against the others risks becoming 'a raft of Medusa', as the historian John Burrow once animatedly observed: 'a boat-load of castaways cannibalizing each other to survive.'[3] 'Ironic high comedy', he suggested, may be preferable, under really unfavourable conditions, to the default temptation towards 'lament', or the 'tragic dignity' of defending 'a last bastion': 'the prospect of death by starvation', he added with comic exaggeration (and more optimistically than not), 'concentrates the mind'.

[3] 'The English Tradition of Liberal Education' (review of Sheldon Rothblatt, *Tradition and Change in English Liberal Education* (1976)), *History of Education Quarterly* 20/2 (1980), 247–53 (252, 248, 247, 252–3).

The main claims for the value of the humanities are:

1. that they study the meaning-making practices of the culture, focusing on interpretation and evaluation with an indispensable element of subjectivity. Strictly speaking this is not a claim for value: it is a justification for the humanities based on perceptions of their distinctive disciplinary character and their distinctive understanding of what constitutes knowledge—differentiating them from the social sciences and the sciences where the emphasis on subjectivity is less strong, though not nil. Any assertions of value attached will be secondary to that description of purpose. I place this claim first because it has a kind of logical priority; also because it commands widespread conviction, and it is, I think, right. It has, however, accrued supporting, often incorrect assumptions about the disciplinary differences between the humanities, the sciences, and the social sciences. The traditional point of comparison (and sometimes opposition) for the humanities has been the sciences. More recently, there has been a shift to casting the social sciences in that role, given the influence they are seen as exerting on government through schools of economics and business and management. I argue that it is vital to preserve a core description of the distinctiveness of humanistic interpretation (there are clear and definitive differences between the kinds of work pursued in the different faculties of universities), but there are good reasons to be wary of reinventing the two cultures debate with the social sciences now mis-described as the antagonist.

2. the claim that the humanities are useful to society in ways that put pressure on how governments commonly understand use, especially the prioritization of economic usefulness and the means of measuring it. There is an old line of argument that the humanities are necessarily (some will say laudably) useless, or at a remove from accounts of practical ends and economic utility. This has been a common line of resistance to political economists from Adam Smith onwards who have stressed usefulness as a desirable aim of publicly funded education. More recent advocates for the humanities have worked hard to invert the long-standing defence, arguing (with good evidence) that they make a significant contribution to the knowledge economy and to the economy proper—measurable in terms of the benefits to GDP, footfalls in bookshops, museums, theatres, heritage sites, and so forth. Though some who hang on to the old claim defend it absolutely (deeming the value of the humanities to be deformed or betrayed as soon as questions of utility or application are brought into consideration), a more plausible interpretation

treats usefulness as a legitimate but only minor or secondary, and often accidental, aspect of humanities scholarship's public value. I am particularly interested in the version of this moderate claim that sees the practical utility of the humanities as pertinent to the evaluation of a basic or primary education, but diminishing in importance as one goes up the scale into higher education, where one is, almost by definition, dealing with forms of enquiry whose value is more intangible or not yet known. This tapering away of usefulness will be less true for some other disciplines (notably medicine, and the applied sciences and social sciences), but there will be a strong measure of truth in the description wherever new and unfettered intellectual enquiry is involved.

3. the claim that the humanities have a contribution to make to our individual and collective happiness. This may be the least trusted line of defence now, but it has a distinguished history and renewed topicality within government at the time of writing. Efforts to understand gains to the public good in ways that go deeper than economic benefits have received serious attention in recent years, and there have been warm encouragements to think of the emotions and passions as, themselves, goods. Chapter 3 ('Socrates Dissatisfied') explores the grounds for a qualitative hedonistic argument for the humanities, testing its weight as a means of rebalancing arguments that stress too exclusively the humanities' critical function. The core assertion here is not the (overpitched) one that 'the humanities will make you happy'; rather, that the humanities can help us to understand better what happiness is, how we may better put ourselves in the way of it, and how education may improve the kind and quality of some of our pleasures. For Mill the impediment in the way of securing the larger claim (that they can improve the quality of the society's happiness) was the difficulty of persuading individuals interested in their own happiness, and presumed to be egoistically motivated, why they should care also for the collective or general well-being. That problem can still detain politicians; it is less likely to worry utilitarian philosophers, for whom the goal can just consist in individual psychological improvements.

4. 'Democracy Needs Us'. This fourth claim is the most politically ambitious argument now regularly heard for the humanities in Britain. It is clearly a claim one would want to have on one's side, if it can be made secure. It has a proximate source in the American liberal arts tradition and prominent recent exponents in Martha Nussbaum, Geoffrey Harpham,

and (in the UK) Francis Mulhern. Its longer roots lie in Socrates' claim to be 'a sort of gadfly, given to the *Polis*'. Chapter 4 examines the strengths and potential weaknesses of the classical model, making a case for adapting and modernizing what was, in its origins, a description of the philosopher as isolated agitant (not, as it now needs to be, a description befitting institutionally based professionals). I suggest that we should treat with caution any version that lends unduly narrowed and exclusive importance to the humanities on the basis of their (serious, but not *definitive*) role in assisting informed and properly critical perspectives on social and political life. Proponents of the 'democracy needs us' argument also need to work harder if they are to explain satisfactorily how and why, when adopted by higher education professors and students, it does not commit us to a guardianship model of the democracy that many would instinctively resist. Should we not rather trust the intelligence of the majority of sufficiently but not 'highly' educated people? With those caveats in place, the claim stands that the humanities, centrally concerned as they are with the cultural practices of reflection, argument, criticism, and speculative testing of ideas, have a substantial contribution to make to the good working of democracy.

5. The final claim explored here is that the humanities matter for their own sake. A common feature of all the other justifications treated is that they are consequentialist, resting on a conviction that the humanities have good effects in the world by their impact on our cultural life, our happiness, our politics. That consequentialism will be attractive to anyone tasked with demonstrating the humanities' public benefit, but it neglects what has often been thought of as the 'intrinsic value' of the objects studied. With good reason. Intrinsic value has been something of an embarrassment as a criterion for aesthetic and other modes of judgement. It runs counter to many modern critics' understanding of how pervasively valuations are coloured by the perceiver's interests. It is also frequently hampered by being drawn into a mistaken opposition with instrumental value. I consider the most influential efforts to secure the claim to intrinsic value, but conclude that this is not, finally, the ground humanities scholars want to be on. We shall do better to argue for the value of the objects and practices that matter to us by calling on long-standing intuitions of value (often taken as self-evident by the wider public), and, relatedly, on the ground of long-standing cultural settlements, and evolving agreements, about how and why the humanities have value 'for their own sake'—a value that is neither purely intrinsic nor merely subjective.

It will be apparent from this initial outline of the terrain that my approach to the subject is political and driven in part by topical concerns. It is also however more fundamentally or, for want of a better word, abstractly philosophical. My aim has been to avoid, as far as possible, immersion only in the current state of institutional debate, which will quickly date, and to try rather to ascertain what the grounds for argument are with each of the conventional claims: where they work, what they imply, under what conditions they will cease to have credibility or must acknowledge limits on their credibility. To an extent I have also been interested in genealogies of argument (though a fully historical account of genealogies is clearly beyond my scope here). No one trained in the literature and history of the nineteenth century can fail to perceive that the arguments going on today about the value of the humanities have deep roots in the efforts of many of the best-remembered Victorian writers to articulate, for their period, the value of a 'liberal' education and culture that included extensive attention to 'humane letters'. The grounds of argument are, in many cases, much older than that, but the Victorian period retains explanatory importance because it is then that one sees emerging the now familiar pressure to justify expenditure on educating students in the humanities in the face of resistance from many political economists. It is also then that one starts to see a critical distinction, within the wide remit of a liberal education, between the work of the humanities and the work of the sciences and social sciences. And it is then that there emerges a conscious division of approach between those thinkers (often identified in the period as utilitarian) who approach questions of public value by prioritizing the desired end for society (an increase in prosperity and/or general well-being) and those who understand the proper focus of attention to be the cultivation of the individual mind.[4] Finally, it is in this period that there takes hold the idea that the extension of education is a democratic good: that it is, indeed, a prerequisite for a properly functioning democracy. The understanding that this extension should include *higher* education is not obviously implied, but it has put down gradually strengthening roots over recent decades in America and (relatively recently) in Britain.

[4] See Sheldon Rothblatt, 'The Limbs of Osiris: Liberal Education in the English-Speaking World', in Rothblatt and Björn Wittrock (eds.), *The European and American University since 1800: Historical and Sociological Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 19–73 (esp. 59–66).

I have, therefore, tried to write a book that may attract two different kinds of audience (or appeal to two kinds of interest in the same reader). For the reader primarily concerned with the immediate political purchase now of arguments for the value of the humanities, this book may be read selectively for its taxonomic description of the relevant arguments, and its conclusions about their strengths and (when mishandled, or overpitched) their potential weaknesses. For the more scholarly reader interested in the defence of the humanities as a philosophical activity with a long political and literary history (by 'literary history' I mean to isolate questions of style and rhetorical effectiveness, as well as content), there may be more interest in the book's close consideration of past attempts to argue for the value of education and culture that can, secondarily, help us to construct a persuasive defence of the humanities now, and to avoid some known pitfalls.

I am far from the first to argue that many of today's debates about the value of the university, of education, and of the arts and humanities specifically, bear the traces of earlier imprints.[5] Many of the best contributions to discussion of each of these overlapping subjects in recent years have made the same observation: all Sheldon Rothblatt's writing about the history of the university stresses the critical importance of the nineteenth century in shaping subsequent developments;[6] Bill Readings structures his painfully disenchanted (and still compelling) analysis of the state of today's universities around the contrast between the Humboldtian university of culture and today's internationally marketized 'university of excellence';[7] Stefan Collini's *What Are Universities For?* (2012) constructs its opening arguments against ongoing marketization in the form of critical 'dialogue' with Victorian idealism.[8] By way

[5] See esp. Alan Ryan, *Liberal Anxieties and Liberal Education* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), and Dinah Birch, *Our Victorian Education* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).

[6] See esp. *The Modern University and its Discontents: The Fate of Newman's Legacies in Britain and America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); *Tradition and Change in English Liberal Education: An Essay in History and Culture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1976); *The Revolution of the Dons: Cambridge and Society in Victorian England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968); and, co-edited with Björn Wittrock, *The European and American University since 1800* (see n. 1).

[7] See *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996).

[8] (London: Penguin Books), xi. Though its focus is on the German situation, it is important also to acknowledge the influence of Fritz Ringer's classic study of the process by which the culture of Bildung declined in Germany, as the reactionary educational elite of Germany was at last diminished (if not entirely overcome) by modernization. See *The Decline of the German Mandarins: The German Academic Community, 1890–1933* (1969; rpt Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1990).

of justification for this historical emphasis it would be difficult to improve on Dinah Birch's *Our Victorian Education* (2008). Though Birch focuses on primary and secondary rather than on higher education, her clear-eyed description of why we should keep the Victorian origins of our current educational arguments in view is equally applicable to the condition of our universities. As she observes, our society has inherited from the Victorians a driving belief in the value of education that shaped and continues to shape our society for the better; but we also owe to them patterns of joined debate, and often bitter disputation, over what education should be about, what it should be for, who should pay for it, and how we can best be sure of its worth. She rightly concludes that 'we have not yet resolved [these] disputes'. 'Simply recalling [earlier] thinking will not get us far'—but a sound 'understanding of the origins of our present problems' may show us ways in which 'we can begin to extricate ourselves'.[9]

This is evidently more the case with some arguments than with others. In two of the chapters that follow, the Victorian imprint, though palpable, is plainly much less salient than later transformations of the grounds of defence for the humanities. So: Chapter 1's examination of two and three cultures arguments as they have helped (and hindered) definition of the distinctive work of the humanities acknowledges the formative role played by T. H. Huxley's long-running public argument with Matthew Arnold about the relative priority of literature and science within a liberal education curriculum. Their influence on contemporary ways of articulating the distinctive purpose of the humanities is, however, less relevant and less remembered now than C. P. Snow and F. R. Leavis's antagonistic working of the same terrain in the late 1950s and early 1960s, or, indeed, Alan Sokal's in the 1990s. Changes in the political and institutional contexts within which the humanities function have substantially altered the framework for such claims—though, as I argue, the dead hand of convention has been especially oppressive in this sphere of argument.

The 'Democracy Needs Us' chapter, similarly, has to be cognizant of marked differences between Victorian political contexts and those of today. This claim is the most fervently adopted argument for the humanities now, and it is, for obvious historical reasons, all but absent from English traditions of defence until very recently. It is missing even from the Victorian educational and political literature where one might

[9] (Oxford: Basil Blackwell), viii, 144.

most expect to find it—for example in the writing of William Morris. Most of the leading defenders of humane letters in that century—John Stuart Mill, Ruskin, Newman, Arnold, Pattison—would have agreed in seeing the Socratic model as the origin of modern forms of dialectical argument and, in its accent on the character and ethos of the teacher's influence on the pupil, the ideal educational model. Some (not all) of them held that the objectives of education should include the formation of good citizens. None of them thought that the arts and humanities had a privileged, let alone primary, role to play in training people for civic responsibility. Politically most of us have long ago evolved past most of their reservations about democracy (where there are reservations now they tend to be more about functionality than desirability), but the sense that the political good of higher education depended on its breadth, not on any narrow claims on behalf of the humanities, still requires a response. We can also ask whether our circumstances now are so different as to legitimize the argument on different grounds: for example, do we now inhabit a public sphere so distortively geared to thinking in terms of economic profitability that we need a corrective input from the humanities to redirect our attention to human goods more variously described? I think we do, though it seems to me too narrowly territorial a claim that such corrective thinking is exclusively the task of the humanities.

One recent institutional development (contemporary with the time of writing this book) offers to significantly alter the weighting given to the democratic claim. The potential of higher education to encourage the evolution of democratic structures and to assist democratic practices has been very greatly enhanced by the arrival of massive open online courses (MOOCs). The economic model for those courses is still in the early stages of development in the UK.[10] If their popularity continues, as current patterns suggest it will, they are likely to present a deep challenge to the Socratic model of teaching as the mode of assisting individual education, but they are also likely to boost the credibility of arguments that seek to harness the humanities' training in language use, the evidences of history, varieties of culture, and philosophical enquiry, to the good

[10] An initial consortium of eleven UK universities announced in December 2012 the launch of free, non-credit-bearing internet courses to be available to internet users globally, and expected (as in the US model) to prove particularly attractive to emerging economies. See Rebecca Ratcliffe, 'Top Universities Launch Free Online Courses', *Guardian* 14 December 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2012/dec/14/top-uk-universities-launch-free-online-courses> (accessed 20 December 2012).

working of democracy. Not least, they may offer the first opportunity for serious sociological testing of those claims.

For the 'Distinctions' argument, then, the import of historical comparison is monitory (if we follow closely the history of these arguments to date we shall continue to argue badly). In the case of the 'Democracy Needs Us' argument, it is a reminder that our argumentative needs are (in the UK at least) relatively new, our problems not especially well defined by our history. But there are two conventional modes of arguing for the value of the humanities that warrant rather closer attention to earlier historical modes of defence: the argument with 'use value', and the argument for a contribution to happiness. It seems to me that in both these instances we are in danger of forgetting what earlier advocates for the humanities knew well: the power and the limitations of these particular lines of reasoning, even granting major differences in the contexts and audiences of debate. Accordingly, I have asked my reader to go fairly deeply into Mill on happiness, and Arnold on graduated usefulness. The reader should expect a cranking up of the scholarly apparatus in keeping with the shift to historical reclamation as well as philosophical scrutiny.

Chapter 2's exploration of 'instrumental value' examines one route out of the familiar structural opposition between use and uselessness—a focus prompted by a comparative reading of *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) with reports Arnold wrote during the same period as an Education Department inspector of schools and universities. This is, clearly, not the Marxist definition of use value as pure non-economic consent to a lived need, as against economic exchange value. 'Use value' for Arnold meant something much closer to the common currency of today's government policy directives to enhance practical use as an end of education. 'Culture and its Enemies' (the lecture that formed the kernel of *Culture and Anarchy*) was written in the immediate aftermath of two years' work reporting on *Schools and Universities on the Continent* (1868), in the course of which Arnold had ample cause to reflect on the validity but also the limits of use value in education. To read Arnold on primary schools is to find an author fully prepared to talk in terms of practical use value, especially when standards of attainment are low for historically or politically contingent reasons. But even in such circumstances, Arnold hardly ever talks solely in such terms. Usefulness is important at the beginning of any individual's schooling, but 'higher' and longer-term ways of thinking about the good of education quickly

come into play. They include the power to employ one's intelligence freely, or non-mechanically—not least in maintaining scepticism towards any self-serving claims about the greater importance of one area of study over another. For Arnold, this controlled appeal to 'use' entails a point about public values, but also a point about the language in which we debate and uphold such values. One of the reasons why *Culture and Anarchy* has continued to hold such a prominent place in the critical literature on the meaning and value of culture (heavily contested, but no less strong for being so) is that, though it was written by a man one could (without stretching the term too far) call a bureaucrat, it concedes almost nothing to the formulaic language of bureaucracy that standardly places a high value on practical usefulness and economic utility. Arnold's alternative terms of validation did not last, but he knew that this fate will befall any language that attempts to fix the value of culture. I am interested in the reverberations of that strategy for today's defences of culture and education, arguing that Arnold's conclusion retains validity, and need not bring in its train his high-cultural assumptions.

The most famous formulation of the 'improvement in happiness' argument for the humanities, even now, is John Stuart Mill's description of how reading Wordsworth rescued him from the mental aridity of an unsentimental education. Mill's claims for poetry have clear continuities with the Romantic valuation of feeling over reason, but they also show him going back to the roots of utilitarianism in Epicurean hedonism. So, Chapter 3 rereads Mill in order to test the weight of qualitative hedonistic arguments as a means of rebalancing claims that place all the emphasis on the humanities' critical function. Mill gave us some widely respected reasons for saying that poetry, specifically—but, by implication, all writing that assists the cultivation of feeling—can help us to understand better what happiness is, and how we may better put ourselves in the way of it (though doing so will never be entirely within our control). In *Utilitarianism* and other writings on politics and education he also gave some good reasons to support a claim that a liberal higher education with literature, languages, and history in its remit may, for that relatively small proportion of the population that pursues it, increase the kind and quality of our individual intellectual pleasures. (In this vein he has been an acknowledged influence on some recent writing in behavioural economics—though the majority of writers in that field seem oddly unaware that their subject has a

philosophical history.) In his role as Rector of St Andrews University, in the 1870s, Mill argued more directly for the importance of the humanities as one element in a liberal education, on the grounds that they help to preserve the cultural inheritance for following generations in ways that are not merely custodial but assist ongoing human intellectual and cultural achievements. All these things said, he put a check on any too ambitious claim for the humanities' role in promoting the happiness of society, identifying some serious problems in the way of connecting gains in individual happiness to that great utilitarian goal, quantifiable improvements in 'the general happiness'.

The final chapter ('For its Own Sake') necessitates some close attention to philosophy of value, but its conclusions encourage greater movement away from historical precedent than we have yet seen. The idea that the humanities have value in their own right, in ways that are not primarily consequentialist or to be accounted for by evidence of their instrumental effects in the world, has had strong advocates during the last two and a half centuries, among them Ruskin, in the Victorian period, and Geoffrey Hill, rereading Ruskin (and others) at the end of the twentieth century. Both attempted to secure the ground for valuation by reference to 'intrinsic value'. Readers of Hill have often detected a declining level of conviction in his writings on this subject over recent years: awareness that such an argument now must be knowingly 'failed', though it is not to be absolutely abandoned. Chapter 5 explores these efforts to redeem intrinsic value, briefly contrasting Hill's astringency with the more optimistic defence of contextual valuation offered by John Dewey. It then develops in its place the more readily defensible claim that the areas of study we now call 'the humanities' have value 'for their own sake'. Though the 'for its own sake' claim is not without its own philosophical difficulties it is relatively free of the fetishistic quality often attached to belief in 'intrinsic value' and, as described in Chapter 5, it does not require the 'value isolationism' that has derailed many attempts to define and defend 'intrinsic value' over the years.

We look to past educational debates 'not ... for the sake of analogy', Sheldon Rothblatt warns, 'for analogy is limiting'; rather 'for the sake of recognition'.[11] This is right, but there are evident points at which continuities are imperfect, and some at which recognition must be

[11] *Revolution of the Dons*, 17.


image
not
available

One of the ways in which this book has changed significantly in the course of researching and writing has been with the growing realization that the American and English traditions of defence for the humanities are much less readily compatible than I expected to find them.[16] Many of the most high-profile recent defences of the humanities coming out of America, including Martha Nussbaum's *Not for Profit* (2010),[17] Louis Menand's *The Marketplace of Ideas* (2010),[18] and Geoffrey Harpham's *The Humanities and the Dream of America* (2011), have found a ready and sympathetic audience in the UK. Much of the critical literature that I have found most helpful (the work of John Guillory and Amanda Anderson, for example) comes from that section of the American literary profession, principally in English and 'theory', which has concerned itself more broadly with the political responsibilities of 'the academy' and 'the profession'. Thought provoking though these writers are, they are often distinctively American in their concerns, responding to greater pressures to redirect funding from the humanities towards vocational and business studies than have yet operated in Britain, and more worrying drops in the overall numbers and relative proportion of students studying the humanities at undergraduate level. Their core concern is often with faltering commitments on the part of state governments and individual institutions to liberal arts education, from primary school upwards. Their responses can seem (to the external viewer) perhaps excessively preoccupied with the question of whether and how to reduce numbers of doctoral students, given the reduced opportunities for entry into the academic profession, and how to reverse a process (not true, though it may become true, in the UK) by which graduate teaching has come to be valued at the expense of undergraduate teaching. They have also been more preoccupied with threats to academic freedom (necessarily, given the extent of budget control by state legislatures, and the degree of interference in the content of education

[16] This is not to deny the growing convergence of national systems in the globalized landscape of higher education. See Tony Becher and Paul R. Trowler, *Academic Tribes and Territories: Intellectual Enquiry and the Culture of Disciplines*, 2nd edn. (Buckingham: The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press, 2001), 2–4.

[17] *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

[18] *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University* (New York: W. W. Norton).

in many universities). The case in England is not the same. It would be difficult to say whether it is 'better' or 'worse' other than on a case-by-case basis—the major difference being the greater centralization of the economic framework for higher education and of research funding and assessment policy.[19] The relative rarity of elective courses removes the major source of demand for the humanities found in the US liberal arts system—but removes also their most immediate vulnerability to changes in any given institution's commitment to that system.

In part because the liberal arts model has been so important historically and ideologically in the United States, in part also because of the much greater number of privately funded institutions of education in the higher education system and the more entrenched resistance to the idea that the state (in the British sense) should provide ('public good' does not automatically register a government-funded good in the USA, as it does in the UK), the kinds of claim investigated here will inevitably look different to transatlantic eyes. To take only the most obvious example: my reservations about the extent to which one can push the 'democracy needs us' argument will be weighed differently by readers within a liberal arts system. (I suspect they will be read as excessively or unhelpfully sceptical.) Even within such a system, there seems to me a need to ensure that the corrective function often ascribed to a broadly informed 'liberal' intelligence does not become a claim for a specific humanities advantage without explaining how and why the humanities should be thought to have a special purchase on critical intelligence (or even historical critique, or rhetorical analysis).

A large question for anyone trying to assess the force of historic justifications now, in almost any national context, is whether talk of non-market values, of whatever political cast, where the goals of higher education are concerned, still has purchase in an economic context that many commentators would describe, after the American example, as 'neoliberal'—that is, thoroughly under the sway of market forces. More strenuously described: neoliberalism is the name given to a mode of government, understood to be globally in the ascendant, in which 'all dimensions of human life are cast in terms of

[19] A clear account of the increasing externalist pressures on academic cultures in Britain is given by Becher and Trowler, *Academic Tribes and Territories*. See esp. preface to the 2nd edn.

Index