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Socrates Untenured

New Wine and New Bottles

Society will be changed by COVID-19. But how and to what degree? Rather than being a shock the size of 9/11 or the Great Recession, COVID-19 may be destined to become a more profound dividing line. Think the French Revolution or the Great War, events that ended empires and redefined cultural assumptions. A retreat from globalization, the United States devolving toward articles of confederation, the end of traditional college, new types of intimacy—all this and more may lie before us.

COVID-19—not just the pandemic, but the complex phenomenon now encompassing economic collapse and social unrest—clears away the distracting details of our lives. The time spent quarantined allows us to reflect on basic motivations and goals, and examine the narratives we’ve used to explain our lives to ourselves and others. And to compose new narratives: Kim Stanley Robinson describes us as “stuck in a science-fiction novel that we’re writing together.” Ideas that could not gain a serious hearing are now being considered, such as a national conversation about policing or House Speaker Nancy Pelosi floating the idea of universal basic income.

What’s less often discussed are the conditions necessary for these shifts to successfully occur. Creating a new future means changing our institutions and social relations. But it also means reviewing what philosophers call our fundamental ontology—the basic categories we use to think about our challenges, and the basic ways we find meaning in our lives. Otherwise we’re in danger of returning to the behaviors that brought us to the current crisis.

One example is our habit of dividing the world into the two supposedly separate buckets of facts and values. Blue ribbon panels and leading think tanks are generating plans for a postpandemic future. These efforts involve the standard lineup of disciplinary specialists (in this case, labor economists, epidemiologists, health care modelers) matched with former politicians at policy institutes who address the values side of things. These are useful people to have around in a crisis. But this list also leaves out some crucial perspectives.

Let’s review the categorical status quo. It’s an old trope but a sturdy one: decisions involve adjudicating between facts and values. In our mind’s eye neither is open to

debate. As long as they aren’t fake, facts are unassailable. Facts relate straightforward, objective truths about the world. Intellectuals talk about the complexities of interpreting models and understanding open systems, but such subtleties gain little traction when pitted against the rhetoric of those speaking with certainty.

The situation is similar with values. They too are not arguable, if for opposite reasons. Values are subjective, rooted in feelings pulled from the dark recesses of historical and cultural prejudice. There is no reasoning with or about them: *de gustibus non est disputandum*, the claim that there is no disputing about taste, refers not only to aesthetics but also to ethics and politics.

For the past half century philosophers have worn themselves out explaining the mistakenness of the fact-value distinction. They’ve offered a number of arguments: facts depend on a prior decision of what’s worth investigating; facts have to be interpreted, a process that depends in part on one’s values and perspective; and conversely values and feelings are themselves reasonable, in the sense that we can offer an explanation for our values and demand the same from others.

But no matter: the fact-value distinction rears its head no matter how many times it’s been slain. It’s embedded in the structure of our knowledge system, and in the organizational distinction between the natural and social sciences. The natural sciences are thought to give us facts, the social sciences facts about values. The inadequacy of this division is one of the sources of contemporary talk of post-truth.

Binary thinking comes naturally to humans. Fifty years of philosophical labor suggest that a frontal assault on this habit is unlikely to succeed. Of course, on a brute level the distinction is correct: drinking bleach *is* bad for your health, and some aesthetic or political views *are* merely a matter of taste. It’s just that there are vast areas where the distinction loses its usefulness—for example, where the development of CRISPR technology for gene editing brings with it profound questions of whether humans should try to direct their own evolutionary pathways, questions that are neither subjective or objective.

This is where poets, artists, and philosophers come in. Their work doesn't turn on the axis of facts and values—although this hasn't stopped attempts to squeeze them into these categories. The expressionist view of art consigns art and poetry to the subjective side of things. Artists are seen as Romantics, expressing the feelings within them. Philosophers are pushed in the opposite direction, portrayed as objective, Spock-like beings who churn out logical consequences with no regard for human feelings.

Despite such efforts, poets, artists, and philosophers inhabit a space apart from the fact-value realm of the natural and social sciences. It's a region ruled by the imagination, or to speak again in binary terms, by processes of conjecture and refutation. (The terms have been applied to scientific thinking, but their roots are essentially humanistic.) The point of these efforts is disruption—to challenge existing categories and invent new ones. This increases the range of possible decisions, not to dictate policy but rather to enlarge the landscape for those who do.

I'm not proposing a hiring program for humanists. In fact, as currently constituted the humanities are part of the problem. The issue is institutional in nature: more than 100 years ago the humanities erred in accepting the ontology of the modern research university. In contrast with the medieval university, the modern research university is essentially democratic—all fields are placed on the same plane. The humanities, however, properly exist at a higher taxonomic level from the natural and social sciences.

This is part of the historical record. The sciences grew out of the humanities in the nineteenth century, the natural sciences subdividing natural philosophy, and the social sciences doing the same for moral philosophy. This sectioning has given us modern technoscience, but this came at the cost of these fields no longer framing their studies within larger questions of meaning and purpose. The humanities, moreover, have suffered from being placed at the same taxonomic level as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics—the STEM disciplines. They should never have been solely, or even mainly, their own specialized domains. Their home is at the genus level, hovering above and asking questions about the overall mission of the sciences, as the sciences had once done for themselves.

The practical consequences of this ontological (or if you prefer, taxonomic) error have been severe. Like the sciences, the humanities have been organized in terms of departments filled with other, similar specialists, and encouraged to turn inward and to mainly talk to one another, when they should have had a continued guiding presence in these fields. Instead, the humanities embraced the research paradigm that prioritizes the endless production of new knowledge, which in practice meant specialist knowledge. Such specialization has proved useful in the sciences, if also at points dangerous (see nuclear weapons, social media). But

it is a distraction in the humanities, where the bulk of the work should consist in raising perennial questions (e.g., “Is this fair? Is this meaningful?”) in the context of our many projects.

Shorn of their disciplinary trappings, the figures of the poet, artist, and philosopher are archetypes rather than academic designations. By *poet* I do not mean the person who writes rhymed or free verse, but rather anyone who creates an arresting image. By *artist* I mean the master-narrativist who is able to offer a compelling story that makes sense of our life. And by *philosopher* I mean anyone who asks how these images and narratives contribute to the fashioning of a humane life.

The challenge facing us, then, is one of disciplinarity. Panels and committees are formed around the belief that all knowledge can be organized by and pursued through disciplines, which are themselves built around the fact-value distinction. Disciplines are remarkably useful for managing the pursuit of knowledge across the sciences. But disciplines can also keep us from breaking free from the habitual ways of approaching problems.

At this point it may seem that I have argued myself into a corner. If the sciences, natural and social, need the humanities to guide the pursuit of knowledge, but the humanities have been deformed by being disciplined within the modern research university, where do we turn to find new voices and perspectives?

The problem concerns more than the question of selection. We can put an English professor or an independent filmmaker or a community activist on a panel, but the inclusion of a token oddball solves little. The problem is deeper than that. A background in labor economics or epidemiology should be not only an area of expertise but also a prism through which one asks fundamental questions about where we are going. This would be to awaken the vestiges of an older tradition, to take the title of PhD seriously, with the expectation that the technical knowledge of the physicist or computer scientist is put to the service of creating a more humane world.

COVID-19 has created an opening in the status quo. Perhaps the global consensus about free markets gets questioned. Perhaps government can be looked upon as the solution to our problems rather than itself being the problem. These are worthy questions. But the roles of poet, artist, and philosopher raise possibilities at another level—asking whether our lives need to consist, as the playwright Clifford Odets once put it, of “hurry, worry, and scurry.”

New patterns of thought and action are difficult to generate and harder to enact. The temptation will be to try to make culture great again by resurrecting the past. Often, however, the past cannot be retrieved, and our best hope is the fermentation of new worldviews. We need both new wine and new bottles—new ideas as well as new institutions to make them vibrant.

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