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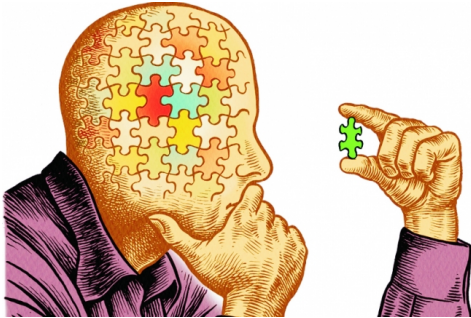
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THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

Beyond Critical Thinking



Christophe Vorlet for The Chronicle Review

By Michael S. Roth | JANUARY 03, 2010

The antivocational dimension of the humanities has been a source of pride and embarrassment for generations. The persistence of this reputed uselessness is puzzling given the fact that an education in the humanities allows one to develop skills in reading, writing, reflection, and interpretation that are highly prized in our economy and

culture. Sure, specific training in a discrete set of skills might prepare you for Day 1 of the worst job you'll ever have (your first), but the humanities teach elements of mind and heart that you will draw upon for decades of innovative and focused work. But we do teach a set of skills, or an attitude, in the humanities that may have more to do with our antipractical reputation than the antivocational notion of freedom embedded in the liberal arts. This is the set of skills that usually goes under the rubric of critical thinking.

Although critical thinking first gained its current significance as a mode of interpretation and evaluation to guide beliefs and actions in the 1940s, the term took off in education circles after Robert H. Ennis published "A Concept of Critical Thinking" in the *Harvard Educational Review* in 1962. Ennis was interested in how we teach the "correct assessment of statements," and he offered an analysis of 12 aspects of this process. Ennis and countless educational theorists who have come after him have sung the praises of critical thinking. There is now a Foundation for Critical Thinking and an industry of consultants to help you enhance this capacity in your teachers, students, or yourself.

A common way to show that one has sharpened one's critical thinking is to display an ability to see through or undermine statements made by (or beliefs held by) others. Thus, our best students are really good at one aspect of critical thinking—being critical. For many students today, being smart *means* being critical. To be able to show that Hegel's concept of narrative foreclosed the non-European, or that Butler's stance on vulnerability contradicts her conception of performativity, or that a tenured professor has failed to account for his own "privilege"—these are marks of sophistication, signs of one's ability to participate fully in the academic tribe. But this participation, being entirely negative, is not only seriously unsatisfying; it is ultimately counterproductive.

The skill at unmasking error, or simple intellectual one-upmanship, is not completely without value, but we should be wary of creating a class of self-satisfied debunkers or, to use a currently fashionable word on campuses, people who like to "trouble" ideas. In overdeveloping the capacity to show how texts, institutions, or people fail to accomplish what they set out to do, we may be depriving students of the capacity to learn as much as possible from what they study. In a humanities culture in which being smart often means being a critical unmasker, our students may become too good at showing how things *don't* make sense. That very skill may diminish their capacity to find or create meaning and direction in the books they read and the world in which they live. Once outside the university, our students continue to score points by displaying the critical prowess for which they were rewarded in school. They wind up contributing to a cultural climate that has little tolerance for finding or making meaning, whose intellectuals and cultural commentators delight in being able to show that somebody else is not to be believed.

I doubt that this is a particularly contemporary development. In the 18th century there were complaints about an Enlightenment culture that prized only skepticism and that was satisfied only with disbelief. Our contemporary version of this trend, though, has become skeptical even about skepticism. We no longer have the courage of our lack of conviction. Perhaps that's why we teach our students that it's cool to say that they are engaged in "troubling" an assumption or a belief. To declare that one wanted to disprove a view would show too much faith in the ability to tell truth from falsehood. And to declare that one was receptive to learning from someone else's view would show too much openness to being persuaded by an idea that might soon be deconstructed (or simply mocked).

In training our students in the techniques of critical thinking, we may be giving them reasons to remain guarded—which can translate into reasons not to learn. The confident refusal to be affected by those with whom we disagree seems to have infected much of our cultural life: from politics to the press, from siloed academic programs (no matter how multidisciplinary) to warring public intellectuals. As humanities teachers, however, we must find ways for our students to open themselves to the emotional and cognitive power of history and literature that might initially rub them the wrong way, or just seem foreign. Critical thinking is sterile without the capacity for empathy and comprehension that stretches the self.

One of the crucial tasks of the humanities should be to help students cultivate the willingness and ability to learn from material they might otherwise reject or ignore. This material will often surprise students and sometimes upset them. Students seem to have learned that teaching-evaluation committees take seriously the criticism that "the professor, or the material, made me uncomfortable." This complaint is so toxic because being made uncomfortable may be a necessary component of an education in the humanities. Creating a humanistic culture that values the desire to learn from unexpected and uncomfortable sources as much as it values the critical faculties would be an important contribution to our academic and civic life.

But the contemporary humanities should do more than supplement critical thinking with empathy and a desire to understand others from their own point of view. We should also supplement our strong critical engagement with cultural and social norms by developing modes of teaching that allow our students to enter in the value-laden practices of a particular culture to understand better how these values are legitimated: how the values are lived as legitimate. Current thinking in the humanities is often strong at showing that values that are said to be shared are really imposed on more-vulnerable members of a particular group. Current thinking in the humanities is also good at showing the contextualization of norms, whether the context is generated by an anthropological, historical, or other disciplinary matrix. But in both of these cases we ask our students to develop a critical distance from the context or culture they are studying.

Many humanities professors have become disinclined to investigate with our students how we generate the values we believe in, or the norms according to which we go about our lives. In other words, we have been less interested in showing how we make a norm legitimate than in sharpening our tools for delegitimization. The philosopher Robert Pippin has recently made a similar point, and has described how evolutionary biology and psychology have moved into this terrain, explaining moral values as the product of the same dynamic that gives rise to the taste for sweets. Pippin argues, on the contrary, that "the practical autonomy of the normative is the proper terrain of the humanities," and he has an easy task of showing how the pseudoscientific evolutionary "explanation" of our moral choices is a pretty flimsy "just-so" story.

If we humanities professors saw ourselves more often as explorers of the normative than as critics of normativity, we would have a better chance to reconnect our intellectual work to broader currents in public culture. This does not have to mean an acceptance of the status quo, but it does mean an effort to understand the practices of cultures (including our own) from the point of view of those participating in them. This would include an understanding of how cultures change. For many of us, this would mean complementing our literary or textual work with participation in community, with what are often called service-learning courses. For others, it would mean approaching our object of study not with the anticipated goal of exposing weakness or mystification but with the goal of turning ourselves in such a way as to see how what we study might inform our thinking and our lives.

I realize that I am arguing for a mode of humanistic education that many practice already. It is a mode that can take language very seriously, but rather than seeing it as the master mediator between us and the world, a matrix of representations always doomed to fail, it sees language as itself a cultural practice to be understood from the point of view of those using it.

The fact that language fails according to some impossible criterion, or that we fail in our use of it, is no news, really. It is part of our finitude, but it should not be taken as the key marker of our humanity. The news that *is* brought by the humanities is a way of turning the heart and the spirit so as to hear possibilities of various forms of life in which we might participate. When we learn to read or look or listen intensively, we are not just becoming adept at exposing falsehood or at uncovering yet more examples of the duplicities of culture

and society. We are partially overcoming our own blindness by trying to understand something from another's artistic, philosophical, or historical point of view. William James put it perfectly in a talk to teachers and students entitled "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings": "The meanings are there for others, but they are not there for us." James saw the recognition of this blindness as key to education as well as to the development of democracy and civil society. Of course hard-nosed critical thinking may help in this endeavor, but it also may be a way we learn to protect ourselves from the acknowledgment and insight that humanistic study has to offer. As students and as teachers we sometimes crave that protection because without it we risk being open to changing who we are. In order to overcome this blindness, we risk being very uncomfortable indeed.

It is my hope that humanists will continue offering criticism, making connections, and finding ways to acknowledge practices that seem at first opaque or even invisible. In supporting a transition from critical thinking to practical exploration, I am echoing a comment made by my undergraduate philosophy teacher Louis Mink, and echoed by my graduate mentor, Richard Rorty. Years before Dick Rorty deconstructed the idea of the "philosopher as referee," Louis Mink suggested that critics "exchange the judge's wig for the guide's cap." I think we may say the same for humanists, who can, in his words, "show us details and patterns and relations which we would not have seen or heard for ourselves."

My humanities teachers enriched my life by showing me details and pattern and relations. In so doing they also helped me to acquire tools that have energetically shaped my scholarship and my interactions with colleagues and students. It is my hope that as guides, not judges, we can show our students how to engage in the practice of exploring objects, norms, and values that inform diverse cultures. In doing so, students will develop the ability to converse with others about shaping the objects, norms, and values that will inform their own lives. They will develop the ability to add value to (and not merely criticize values in) whatever organizations in which they participate. They will often reject roads that others have taken, and they will sometimes chart new paths. But guided by the humanities, they will increase their ability to find together ways of living that have meaning and direction, illuminating paths immensely practical and sustaining.

Michael S. Roth is an intellectual historian and president of Wesleyan University. This essay was part of a lecture commemorating the 50th anniversary of the founding of Wesleyan's Center for the Humanities.

1255 Twenty-Third St., N.W.
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