

I, Human

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“The humanities today are experiencing a *crisis*—an existential threat that perpetuates their need for justification in the modern university.”¹ So opens Alison Brady’s thought-provoking paper. With everything we associate with the humanities on the line, Brady acknowledges that this crisis seems to call for redoubled critical examination of its causes and of what must be rejected in order to save these fields of study. Surprisingly, and in original fashion, though, she turns away from this well-worn path. Instead, she contends that the humanities should claim a place in the university on the basis of their powers of enchantment.

I cannot overemphasize how much I agree with the spirit of Brady’s proposal. In particular, I share her desire to ground the humanities on the priority of affirmation to critical negation, and on that of a kind of enchanting experience to detached judgment. In my response to her essay, I shall simply raise some further questions about how we may start to reorient humanities study so that it makes these priorities clearer. One thing that especially interests me is how this study could set a direction for a new form of philosophizing.

Brady’s argument can be roughly analyzed into five main steps:

The first, as we saw above, states the problem. Universities are increasingly pulling the plug on humanities programs. Student interest in these programs is plummeting and this is understandable because humanities degrees do not seem tailored to specific, widely available, lucrative jobs. If we cannot demonstrate there is money in these fields, how else may we justify their existence?

The second step evokes one plausible response: The humanities should strive to establish their value in different, non-economic terms. Regardless of their effects on our employability, these fields strengthen the health of our democracies. They do this by cultivating in students the faculty and virtues of critical reason. In our age when disinformation, manipulated passions, and wishful thinking threaten to overthrow democratic procedures of law-making and law-following, we need criticality, and the study that strengthens it, more than ever.

Step three, in a twist, accordingly raises a critical question about step two's line of thinking. "In focusing on critique as a defense of the humanities, are we also peddling a culture of *disenchantment*—one that, ironically, calls for this defense in the first place?"² Following Weber's influential work, Brady intriguingly suggests that the still more disenchanted, "critical ethic" of our day remains in the service of the spirit of capitalism.³ As it becomes ever harder to believe there are sources of meaning that preexist us and give value to our lives, rather than that are simply constructions or products of those possibly meaningless lives, we distract ourselves from our anxiety about life's value by abandoning ourselves ever more desperately to work, consumption, and what they prove about our "election" in quantitative measures. Accordingly, even as we think we are strengthening democracy by promoting the critical ethic, we may well be stoking the very worries that give rise to the calculating students and pitiless accountants scrutinizing the humanities programs' books.

In light of this revised understanding of the threat to the humanities, Brady's fourth argumentative step is to invite us to advocate instead for their enchanting powers. Perhaps their programs can justify their place in the university by nourishing a counterculture to that of disenchantment. Such a culture would be devoted to vividly experiencing, with more sensation, pathos, and thought, the wonder of being alive.

The fifth and final step for Brady is to propose a specific approach to reading that would support this counterculture, one that favors slow contemplation over quick recognition and reaction. She encourages us to cultivate this kind of reading as both an individual and collective enterprise. What justifies the existence of humanities programs in universities, then, is the way this reading may enchant students and furnish their lives with meaning and value.

As I declared at the start, I wholeheartedly back this line of thinking. This hardly means that I (and no doubt Brady, too) am blind to how naïve it may look. Indeed, I wonder if it may not be best to acknowledge squarely the bleakness of the humanities' current prospects. As Brady noted, Weber's name for this predicament is *disenchantment*; I prefer Friedrich Nietzsche's, *nihilism*. Recently, Jean-Luc Nancy explained that "the highest values devalue themselves," to cite Nietzsche's pithy gloss on nihilism, precisely when they are translated

into exchange value.⁴ Because universities, like all of our institutions, are caged in a capitalist framework, I do not see how their programs and other parts can hope to effectively justify their existence in any other terms but financial and nihilistic. If we affirm with Brady that the true value of the humanities runs counter to that of our disenchanting society, then we should prepare ourselves for the likelihood that this value will be increasingly overlooked, if not positively discounted. I suspect that universities and their patrons will always find it useful to keep some trace of the humanities alive for ornamental and ideological purposes. But should we be surprised if these are largely starved of resources and care, existing merely as Potemkin Villages?

For this reason, I have little confidence that the humanities can be justified in Brady's terms to anyone except their initiates. Perhaps someday, when there is an active and promising movement to revolutionize the disenchanting, alienating mode of production, some people will find ways to articulate links between this political project and the value of enchantment. For now, however, we who have experienced and believe in this value should be prepared to pursue our work unjustified. To sustain our sense of purpose and morale in a largely uncomprehending society, then, we might consider sharpening, for ourselves, the disenchantment/enchantment dichotomy. Weber's formulation was groundbreaking, but it eventually founders on the fact that nothing is more enchanted these days than the commodity. Exhortations to read sensuously, like Sontag's, can hardly hope to compete with advertisements for Apple's latest goggles. Consequently, we might do better to concede that enchantment comes in various forms and that the difference that matters is the one between bad and good enchantment. The former, to echo Weber's concept of the rationalization of society but rebooting it for today, is linked to *automatonization*. We are vulnerable to being enchanted by gadgets that raise the disturbing question of whether we are controlling the machine or whether the machine is controlling us. (Matthew Arnold, in *Culture and Anarchy*, already prophesized this danger in his concern over mechanical forms of thinking.)⁵ In contrast, there is the form of enchantment that Brady champions, one linked to humanization. This last term refers to the possibility and promise of actually appreciating the human noise in the automaton. For some of us, it could be the very meaning of the

humanities.

Suppose we return, then, to the trial of the humanities in the contemporary university. As Socrates taught, perhaps the defendant ought not to beg for their life in terms that betray their integrity. There are worse things than losing administrative support and accreditation. If the soul of the humanities is indeed, as Brady suggests, our marveling at life, then even in hostile territory we can still exercise that marveling, infectiously, in hit-and-run, guerrilla fashion. And Socrates' very discipline may have a vital role to play.

Analysis, clear and distinct ideas, logic, argumentative testing, conclusion: these terms remind us that the traditional practice of philosophy is virtually synonymous with critical reason. Echoing, then, Brady's doubt that an appeal to criticality is the only or even best way to save the humanities, I am not sure that philosophically theorizing their practices will help much either. This also risks subjecting them in the end to the automaton. As an alternative, we might try to surprise and initiate more people into an enchanting and humanizing experience by demonstrating that a quintessential discourse of critical reason can also, with a few twists, be practiced as a discourse of wondering, one that recalls its origins in *thaumazein*, "shocked wonder at the miracle of Being."⁶ Such a form of speech and writing would place more stress on intimation, questioning, provisional formulation, and speculation. Rather than seeking authoritative conclusions, it would aspire to encourage others to participate in an open-ended conversation about deep and mysterious joys that is as inclusive as possible. Thus, even if an essay of this sort starts off as a critical theory of the humanities, as it approaches the regulatory word limit, it would seek to trail off as a philosophical exercise in musing aloud . . .

REFERENCES

1 Alison M. Brady, "Cultivating Slowness as Contemplative Practice: Literature, (Dis)Enchantment and the Modern University," *Philosophy of Education* 80, no. 2., <https://doi.org/10.47927/80.2.109>

2 Brady, "Cultivating Slowness."

3 See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott

Parsons and ed. Richard Swedberg (New York: Norton, 2009).

4 The quote is taken from Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), 9. For Nancy's discussion of nihilism, see Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Truth of Democracy*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

5 See Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy and other writings*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

6 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition, Second Edition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 302.