

Personal Reflections on the Humanities World Report (HWR) Workshop⁺

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Around the world, the incessant rise and development science and technology—armed with digitization, computer banks and data analysis, global networking, etc.—are leading not only to a new age of science and technology fetishism but to an increasingly pragmatic, utilitarian-minded public and officialdom. The people and officials in nearly every country increasingly see the Humanities as mere software, grist for the mill, decorative accessories, while viewing anything to do with science, technology, economics, and/or business to be precious wealth-and-power-generating hardware. Globally, this trend bodes ill for Humanities programs and curricula at universities and research institutes, not to mention for support for funded research in the Humanities, which increasingly appears to consist of self-indulgent, subjective lines of inquiry to pragmatic, utilitarian-

minded policy makers. Ironically, many postmodern Humanities scholars themselves have persuaded themselves to see little of value in their own disciplines.

As a cross-disciplinary scholar with his feet in life science and the social sciences as well as the Humanities, Workshop organizer Poul Holm realizes that there remains much of value in the Humanities, if not for anything else because the Humanities cultivate the basic grounds of human judgment of fact, value and beauty that apply equally to scientific, technological, economic, and business affairs. Moreover, it is to existing human cultures that we must turn to derive new sets of values for, for example, stemming habitat destruction and climate change, etc. Holm sees that the Humanities get into the deeper questions of life and value, which need to be brought to bear

⁺ The Workshop was hosted by the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences and led by Professor Poul Holm, Long Room Hub (IAS), Trinity College, Dublin, held at NTU on May 14-15, 2013.

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in assessing, guiding and directing research in the sciences, technology and policy-making. Bottom line thinking is overly linear and usually blind to unintended consequences.

Holm thinks that Humanities scholars have to be reminded and shaken and stirred to reflect more deeply on what they are doing as Humanities scholars and teachers and its wider importance. They need to be reminded to cherish their learning and expertise, not denigrate their own strengths and importance on shallow pragmatic and utilitarian grounds. He therefore assembled a team of two colleagues with complementary backgrounds to probe more deeply into these issues and problems of the Humanities and the importance of supporting Humanities programs and research more in a sustained way. His team members met and agreed to pool their experience and knowledge of the situations in the EU, the UK and the US, and now have begun to travel the world to learn from the experience of Humanities scholars in East Asia as well as in other parts of the world. IHS at NTU was their stop in this grand mission.

In his workshop presentation, Dominic Scott (Philosophy and Greek Classics, University of Virginia), discussed the sorts of justifications that Humanities scholars tend to give for funding their Humanities research. His examples included intrinsic value, informing social policy, understanding cultural heritage, promoting economic value, contributing to other disciplines, informing undergraduate education, promoting innovation, etc. Poul Holm spoke on the principal forms of Humanities outreach, such as by working with media, museums and galleries and by interacting with business leaders and policy makers. Finally, Arne Jarrick (Center for Cultural Evolution, Stockholm University) set forth the steps that Humanities programs and scholars need to take in order to establish themselves and their "findings" as valuable and effective contributors to social

policy. His challenge was that Humanities findings don't have the objective, repeatable, harness-able status that is characteristic of scientific findings.

While Humanities programs, research and scholars in East Asia face many of the same institutional conditions and problems that stem from an increasingly pragmatic and utilitarian-minded public and officialdom, they enjoy relatively fixed, guaranteed levels of funding and support that would be threatened only by an economic downturn or a national emergency. At the same time, the Humanities' percentage and amount of funding and support in East Asia tends to be rather lean when compared to the largesse that officialdom lavishes on science, technology, economics and administration. In East Asia, Humanities scholars remain deeply concerned that their expertise and judgment be respected, consulted and heeded in public and social discussions and decisions. Indeed, East Asian Humanities scholars often appear in the media and are heeded in questions of urban design and planning, ecological and environmental protection, cultural heritage preservation and interpretation, educational contents and methods, and so forth. However, while their legitimate concerns are respected in such public discussions, they are often mitigated or simply overridden by political and economic interests.

In the East as well as in the West, if we were to claim that Humanities' insight and wisdom needs to be brought to bear in a wider range of social, economic and political issues, we would need to establish the qualifications, the expertise of the Humanities disciplines and scholars. However, that is not as difficult a problem as it might seem at first sight: by definition, historians offer the wisdom of long experience, of what works and what doesn't work, of what promotes good results and what backfires. Philosophers present carefully thought through conditions of judgments of good reason and sound sense. They also bring a range

of ethical considerations to bear in increasingly applied and user-friendly way. Literature scholars interpret and transmit the stories that reflect our lives as human beings—defining who we are, exploring how we relate, questioning how we do well or go wrong, etc. Anthropologists give insight into who we are as an evolving species—and for seeing through our cultural differences to our core identities. And, this only scratches the surface of the range and potential impact of Humanities scholars' expertise.

As to the issue of Humanities establishing themselves and their findings as "valuable and effective contributors to social policy," a big problem is that university administrators have divided Humanities scholars into departments which have to compete for resources within their colleges, scholars who must also compete against their own colleagues for research prizes within their departments. Moreover, the university administrators' increasingly shrill scientific calls to publish 20 page articles, forces the originally broad-minded Humanities scholars to narrow their vision to minute topics of little general interest or value, and thus eventually begin to lose sight of their larger mission, purpose, and role in the university and society. Unfortunately, this trend also causes some Humanities scholars to lose sight of their common ground of dialogue with other Humanities scholars. "I am sorry. I don't know Shakespeare. I only know east coast Canadian female poetry of the 19th century." Inevitably, such scholars increasingly not only lose sight of the larger meaning of their research and findings, they begin to denigrate the value of their own work.

From the East Asian perspective, a weakness of Western (EU, UK, US) Humanities institutions is that they are too rigid and sharply demarcated. From the beginning, traditional East Asian Humanities have been interdisciplinary, interactive

and mutually informative. In this light, traditional East Asian Humanities scholars had literary, philosophical and historical perspectives, and were aware of the larger meaning and purpose of their work. Hence, a recent conference on traditional Chinese Humanities was titled: "The Interaction of Literature, History and Thought: Revisiting the 'Trinity' of Chinese Scholarship," (Rutgers University, November 9-11, 2012). Moreover, East Asian Humanities scholars considered their disciplines to afford important materials for self-cultivation and person-making, not to mention references for public policy and decision-making. However, since so many Humanities professors and researchers in East Asia now receive their advanced degree in the West, they absorb and transplant the rigid, self-limiting Western institutional predilections back home in East Asia. Thus, they enact a process of cultural-intellectual self-colonization.

Also, some of the examples of Western Humanities outreach given in the Workshop did not appear to be entirely appealing or legitimate from the East Asian perspective. Humanities outreach for cultural preservation and transmission, environmental protection, urban design and planning, etc., are fine and well. However, teaching Plato's *Republic* on justice to corporate lawyer or teaching Plato's theory of abstraction to corporate lawyers to better understand intellectual property rights amounts to teaching Plato's wisdom to modern day Sophists who will not use it for the public good but for their own gain and for their own clients! More legitimate forms of outreach in this regard would be, for example, to advise parliamentarians who are formulating laws and regulations about justice or intellectual property rights. In Taiwan, well-trained legal scholars and philosophers of law are consulted to provide briefs and opinions on the latest thinking around the world on certain cutting edge legal issues, such as, say, genetic modification, cloning, surrogate motherhood, etc. Other important

examples of Humanities outreach occur in the field of environmental ethics and agricultural ethics. For example, highly trained agricultural ethicists run public, corporate and governmental workshops on the ethical concerns of standards and practices in the industry and in the field, such as regarding local ecosystems, animal welfare, genetic modification, etc. Taken together, these applied ethics workshops have made a significant impact. They have led at least to amelioration of some of the key ethical problems of farming, the environment and animal welfare.

Again, as to the Humanities establishing themselves and their findings as "valuable and effective contributors to social policy," Humanities scholars have to develop and defend a broader understanding of "findings." Humanities do not exclude the sort of objective, repeatable findings that are typical of the sciences. But, they also include significant finding couched in specific theoretical and cultural contexts, the contexts of literary works and of works of art, the contexts of people's lives and practices in specific eras and societies, etc. Moreover, while lacking the pure objectivity of scientific fact as it were, these Humanities findings offer deep insights in human life, human relationships, human affairs, and these findings increasingly include human relationships with (and impacts on) nature and other species, even depictions and narrations of wider (and narrower) arrays of phenomena.

In closing, I offer a beautiful example of how the Humanities can inform scientific findings and make them more beneficial to people is to be found in the therapeutic regimen called MBSR (mind-based stress reduction) and the cultivation of Mindfulness. For centuries, doctors and scientists have sought cures for debilitating psychological stress and depression, largely in vain. In recent decades, some scientists and doctors discovered that when people practice certain forms of

Buddhist meditation and cultivation, their experience of stress and depression is measurably and significantly reduced. A few of these doctors personally practiced some Buddhist regimens of meditation and cultivation, and achieved not only reduced stress and depression but also increased energy, insight and creativity personally and professionally. Based on their positive experience of Buddhist meditation and practice, these doctors designed the scientifically certified program of MBSR, which anyone can practice and benefit from. This successful form of therapy could not have been worked out or discovered in the absence of the religious practice and phenomena of Buddhism (or a similar religion or practice). This form of therapy required this Buddhist system of belief and practice in order to be discovered, defined and laid out. It could not have been worked out so effectively had it been instructed apart from its home ground in Buddhist wisdom.

Scholars from around Taiwan, as well as from Korea, Japan and Thailand, came together to join this stimulating Workshop on May 14-15 and shared their thoughts and experiences regarding the problems and issues involved in funding and sustaining Humanities programs and research. The discussions were highly spirited yet nuanced and intriguing. Poul Holm and his team recorded (and will analyze) our responses to their presentations, and then left for Nanjing to convene their second workshop at Nanjing University. We look forward to reading and disseminating the final report and findings that Poul Holm and his team submit after holding workshops around Asia, Europe, the Americas and Africa and analyzing the data.