

"What Is Your Philosophy of Life?" Reflections on the Humanities World Report (HWR) Workshop⁺

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When I was a college student in Korea during the 1980s, there were jokes related to humanities majors. "Who is your favorite writer?" was the question that literature majors hated most to receive. The philosophy majors' nightmare question was "What is your philosophy of life?" Studying philosophy, philosophy majors would claim, is not about a "philosophy of life." It is studying and thinking with Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Confucius, Laozi, Zhuxi, and all the others.

Since those days, from time to time I thought about the question, "What is your philosophy of life?" I came to think that if I were to redesign the joke, I wouldn't make this the nightmare question for philosophy majors. After all, philosophy is—and to extend the scope, humanities research and education are—about life. The problem here, though, is when one says "life," the scope of the

connotation of this term is so comprehensive, it is impossible to define it in one or two sentences. Ask students in your classroom to define "life." I am sure students will shake their heads and declare the ineffability of defining "life." The same is the seeming conundrum and also the value of humanities research and education.

The Humanities World Report workshop that took place at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences, National Taiwan University (May 14-15, 2013), was an occasion for scholars of humanities to think about their profession self-reflectively and self-critically. The issues discussed in the workshop were diverse: the roles and functions of humanities; the most urgent themes humanities need to cover in our time; whether humanities research and education have value as they are, or if their value is contingent

⁺ 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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upon their function in a society; what humanities need to do to bridge academic research and society and to inform policy making; and the justifications for funding humanities research and promote humanities education. These and more were some of the issues the workshop participants explored.

The humanities are one of the oldest fields in human intellectual enterprise. Perhaps for that reason, some might think that humanities research and education are now a thing of the past. The "crisis" of humanities has been echoed in the institutions of higher education in North America as in Asia and in Europe. However, any informed reflection on human existence in general and our society and our time in particular should make us ponder whether this "crisis" is inevitable or if it is something we can avoid.

In May 2013, the Faculty of Religious Studies at McGill University in Canada celebrated a receipt of a donation of five million dollars from individual donors (a couple). In a videotaped interview, the husband explained why they had decided to donate such a large sum of money to religious studies instead of to more likely recipients such as scientific research. The donor said that in our time, nothing is more important for the future of humanity to learn other people's religions so we can understand each other and survive together on earth.

As I was watching the video-interview, it came to my mind that the donors' unwavering conviction on the importance of humanities research and education mattered as much as or even more than the amount of money they donated. As society becomes more complex, there are more fields in higher education that rightly claim their importance for our existence. Each has its own importance, and I believe humanities research and education offers the most fundamental foundation for existence. The critical reflections

on the meaning of our own existence into which the humanities consistently inquire give anchorage for values and help us find meanings for our activities.

As the "crisis" of humanities has been an international phenomenon for some time, "advocacy" for the values and meanings of humanities research would require a certain form of international solidarity through which scholars of humanities reconfirm the meaning and value of humanities. At the same time, they should rearticulate the rights to and responsibilities of humanities in our time. The Humanities World Report, in this context, seems a timely and appropriate venue to initiate this international solidarity of humanities. Its first workshop hosted by the Institute demonstrated nothing less than that.