



# End of Humanity(s)?

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Would the end of humanities lead to the end of humanity?



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## About this whitepaper

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Academic research and education are about finding the unknown and making it known. However, in recent years, knowledge has been increasingly commercialised. Rather than finding the unknown, the ability to generate money is now seen as a criterion for valuable research. What happens to humanities when knowledge only matters when it pays? What happens if this results in the disappearance of humanities? Would the end of humanities lead to the end of humanity?

This whitepaper is based on the outcomes of our virtual round table meeting. Several articles were written as an inspiration for the round table discussion. We would like to acknowledge the authors of these articles, the round table report, and the introduction to this whitepaper: R. Anthony Buck, Muhammad Faisal Khalil, Nadine Kanbier, and Matthias Smalbrugge.

# Humanity and humanities

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*Written by Matthias Smalbrugge*





Humanities: the notion is strongly related to the glorious past of classical humanism. Who wouldn't think of authors such as Petrarch, Erasmus or Cellini and Rabelais? Yet, this glorious past is probably more a matter of our reception of certain aspects of the Renaissance than a trustworthy picture of a history that was never uncontested. Petrarch rediscovered Antiquity and its authors but had to fight the cast shadow of Augustine, Erasmus battled against the threats of free choice and tolerance, Cellini turned himself against conventionalism and Rabelais ridiculed the habits and customs of his time. Humanities were about human dignity, freedom and scholarly research. But they were never uncontested. However, they managed to become an important part of scholarly education and once the universities got their modern outlook in the early 19th century, the notion of *Bildung* wrapped up many aspects of what the humanities stood for.

Times may have changed, but humanities are still not uncontested. However, threats have changed since the days of early humanism. The modern university seems to pay lip service to the importance of humanities. Not only it focuses rather on goals that can be easily quantified: number of students, ranking, grants and so on; it also feels the need to justify its role in a society where priorities have changed and where humanities are considered as *nice to have* instead of *need to have*. For instance, notions such as *utility* and *applicability* seem to be of greater importance than they ever were

before. Is the knowledge that results from academic research something we can immediately use in our daily lives? If the society invests in academic research, what then is the return on investment?

Putting it differently, the relationship between society and academia has changed indeed. The idea that a culture needs to be understood to be able to discern its patterns and transformations, has seemingly been put aside. Of course, it is very useful to learn Chinese because China will be the biggest trading partner. Indeed, that is useful and Chinese, in that case, is directly applicable. But knowledge of its culture, the way it conceives of the relationship between individual and community, is not directly applicable. Right. Yet, in the long run, it is this kind of knowledge that allows us to understand how to avoid conflicts, even wars. It allows us to understand how Europe and China each created their own culture (politically, socially, religiously) and how they pursue their goals. Moreover, it helps us to understand how different cultures understand human existence and how they face global pluralism.

Notwithstanding these valuable insights, it is obvious that humanities are facing rough times. They tend to become the stepchild of the alma mater. What then is its future, what is its real role, what is at stake when humanities tend to disappear?

# End of Humanity(s)?

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*Report written by Nadine Kanbier*



*Academic research and education are about finding the unknown and making it known. However, in recent years, knowledge has been increasingly commercialised. Rather than finding the unknown, the ability to generate money is now seen as a criterion for valuable research. What happens to humanities when knowledge only matters when it pays? What happens if this results in the disappearance of humanities? We discussed these topics and issues with participants from various countries and backgrounds.*

## Economic value

Modern academic research is based on the idea of financial investment and return on investment. Put differently, the economic model prevails when it comes to funding research. This is understandable. The climate crisis, for instance, needs considerable investments and no one wants to deny its importance. Yet, the idea that research also implies moral choices, the transformation of mentalities, communities, individual rights and so on, hardly seems to play a role when it comes to funding.

In order to stay relevant, there is a need for humanities to improve their relationship with society and sciences. The current way university education is structured could make the improvement of these relationships more difficult. There is a focus on modernisation and ‘packaging’: you take a discrete area of knowledge, teach it, and then assess it. As universities are becoming more neoliberal in the way

they function, they have also been packaging things as commodities. Things to be sold, attract students with, and generate income. In this kind of environment, it becomes important for disciplines to relate to one another at the educational level. However, they are forced into a relationship of competition. The virtue now is in defending the boundaries of their own discipline, rather than transgressing it.

## Getting rid of the dichotomy

There is a problematic assumption of a hard line between humanities and non-humanities. This is the opposite of a healthy intellectual conversation, one that avoids this dichotomy. We should not make assumptions about how disciplines are different. Instead, we should find commonalities where we do not expect them. If one looks at the value of humanities and that of other disciplines, there are many commonalities. There are different dimensions in the story we have to tell. For example, one can talk about the intrinsic value of knowledge. String theory then does not differ too much from medieval logic. Another example is when we talk about economic value. Languages used in IT and web development are not possible without the humanities. It is hard to make progress in the rapidly expanding world of artificial intelligence without input from the humanities. Rather than keep claiming economic value is being overemphasised, we should join the game.

## Internal threats

Several external factors threaten the humanities: commercialisation, quantification, moral indifference, and lack of money. However, external factors are not the sole reason humanities risk disappearance. Internal factors have an influence too. We have to look inwards to see the entire picture. When talking about getting rid of the dichotomy between humanities and non-humanities, we have an important role to play. Humanities should be much more proud of their own discipline.

Another internal threat is a lack of diversity. This problem may be rooted in the perception of the discipline: that it is a leisure-time pursuit and only some people can afford it. Students from underprivileged backgrounds might lean more towards jobs that bring financial security and social standing. This can cause a certain class imbalance in the discipline.

## Class imbalance

There is a tendency for the language of humanities to overlap with the language of particular social class groups in society, to the point where it almost has an alienating quality. The language of the humanities can be a vehicle for class differences. Some people from underprivileged backgrounds struggle to relate to the language used. Moreover, it is difficult to translate the humanities as a body of knowledge to a broader

public in a way that is compelling beyond certain class boundaries.

Take a subject like the classics. Classics and classical languages will not be taught in most schools. However, it will be taught in private schools. Therefore, there is a relationship between what happens in schools and the kinds of schools certain class backgrounds tend to go to. There is a sociological argument here about the resonance between certain kinds of disciplines and kinds of cultural backgrounds. And it extends broader than that: it has to do with questions of what counts as knowledge and what counts as relevant knowledge.

### What kind of knowledge is useful?

Class differences in humanities could be rooted in the perception of 'useful' knowledge. What kind of knowledge is useful and valuable? When we talk about the value of something, we talk about contributions to the quality of our lives. This contribution can be accomplished in different ways: economic value, social value, and the intrinsic value of personal development. To serve both society and sciences, structural changes are needed. Researchers have to publish, with the main focus on highly ranked journals. It might be more difficult in some areas to focus on contributions to society. If the focus is mostly on contributing to societal aims, it might be more difficult to only publish in highly ranked journals. How research is evaluated and considered as important also has to do with it. If social impact is an important desideratum, then we have to be sure that we know how to measure and assess it.

### Quality assessment

So much of university life is reduced to measures that are only seen to be meaningful if they are metric measures. Value only counts if it can be counted. The answers that we have to put on the paperwork are countable. How many students did it recruit? How did it outcompete its competitors at other institutions? How much money will it bring? If we want to articulate values to the humanities that are qualitative, we are pushing against a system that is moving in the opposite direction. Perhaps one of the major tasks of the humanities going forward is: how does it develop a language of value that is not metrically defined? We should really push for a clear indication of research that is considered to be scoring very well on this dimension, and research that is not.

### Religion and humanities

There is an ongoing debate around what role faculties of Theology and Religious Studies have within the discipline of humanities. There are many arguments on why it is important to have religion, meaning, and spirituality being taught in the university. One of those is that perspectives from theology and the study of religion prove particularly helpful in trying to think through a situation of a crisis. This way, we can imagine what value looks like. What establishes value and what makes something valuable? The in-depth study of religious traditions gives the sense and ability

to imagine that we could see value in different ways. Religious studies provide a large-scale reflection on how to address considerable problems. It is part of other disciplines, but there are good reasons to study religion from its own perspective. For the last few years, theology departments have become broader, including a broader range of areas of scholarship. Cross-disciplinary approaches make for a much richer discussion of what religion is about in the broader world.

When looking at value theories, there is a position called constructivism. When talking about values, there is always something being constructed. If one sees theology as a possible construction, it can tie in and relate to existing approaches.



# Appendix



# The commercialisation of knowledge: Challenges and opportunities

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*Written by Muhammad Faisal Khalil*





Universities in North America and Europe have long been grappling with the commercialisation of the knowledge that they create. It has increasingly become the dominant narrative for knowledge transfer, whereby researchers sell their newly created knowledge to a private company as early as possible. While this process stops further research in the university, it does allow companies with the funding and resourcing to continue the research, even if not as originally intended. These companies then turn this knowledge into products for their own commercial benefit. But the public also benefits, it is said, who through commercial transactions are able to access the benefits of that knowledge. Nevertheless, many experts question the veracity of this narrative, in which the inventor, the company, and the public, all end up benefiting from the commercialisation of knowledge. They argue that it may be equally harmful, not only to the inventor and the public, but also to knowledge itself.<sup>1</sup>

## Commercialisation: opportunities and challenges

Commercialisation does create opportunities for knowledge. For some types of new knowledge, commercialisation is the best way to ensure that it reaches the public and advances society while also benefiting the creators of the new knowledge. Taken

this way, commercialisation is a key mechanism to help knowledge have real-world impact. Litan et al. argue that the ultimate aim of scientific research is to improve the human condition, so aiding the transfer and commercialisation of knowledge serves the interests of not only the inventor but also society.<sup>2</sup> The impacts of this commercialisation have been most palpable in the case of technology. Gulbranson and Audretsch highlight that modern society responds more to advances in technology than to basic science.<sup>3</sup> The digital transformation of society is a crucial example, with Microsoft, Apple, and Google producing technologies that were at first glance received by people as lifestyle choices but really represent digital services that act as a ‘lifeline’.<sup>4</sup> Services, such as a search engine or mobile broadband, not only created basic connectivity but also provided access to a host of other ‘services for society’,<sup>5</sup> including health, education, and finance for the first time for many people. Beyond easier access to these services, the rise in connectivity also offers a range of other strong opportunities to society, including better sharing of information, greater political accountability, greater social activism, and stronger institutions of news and media. Commercialisation, particularly in the context of universities, has also allowed academics to financially benefit from their work and to also see their research advance more rapidly than would have been possible within the limited investments in universities.<sup>6</sup>

Notwithstanding these social goods, there are also significant challenges. The debates in Europe and the US around the private ownership of publicly-funded innovations such as the Internet highlight how the monetisation of the Internet was not the way to deliver the social good of universal broadband access.<sup>7</sup> It can also be felt in the context of hard-to-afford or debt-incurring education in prestigious universities,<sup>8</sup> and the commodified provision of life-saving medical treatments in private healthcare systems across Europe and the US.<sup>9</sup> The most recent example of the social harm commercialisation of knowledge can bring is the case of the COVID-19 vaccine. Intellectual property rules for COVID-19 vaccines have meant that the global manufacture and distribution of vaccines needed to stop the pandemic is not possible. Nine out of ten people in most poor countries likely will not receive a vaccine this year.<sup>10</sup> This has generated significant moral outrage. 175 former heads of state and Nobel laureates recently called on US President Biden to back a waiver on World Trade Organization (WTO) intellectual property rules for COVID-19 vaccines during the pandemic to “expand global manufacturing capacity, unhindered by industry monopolies that are driving the dire supply shortages blocking vaccine access.”<sup>11</sup> Signatories included former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and economist Joseph Stiglitz. A coalition of 250 organisations, including Amnesty International, Public Citizen, and Doctors Without Borders, also issued a similar plea to the WTO.<sup>12</sup>

## Commercialisation: a harm to moral progress?

Beyond its direct benefit or harm to society, commercialisation also has a transformative impact on knowledge itself. With universities in North America and Europe increasingly licensing their new knowledge to private companies, the knowledge that cannot be readily transferred from research to product, and therefore, does not offer clear commercial benefits, comes under fire. This is indeed the case, particularly in the case of the humanities. The humanities are increasingly being perceived to be less vital to society, and therefore, less eligible for investment than the fields that offer material and economic progress. Educational institutions increasingly recognise knowledge as a tool for economic productivity, and this does not bode well for the good of any society. This emphasis on material and economic progress makes the moral progress necessary for morally-grounded society impossible, as the American Muslim scholar Joseph Lumbard notes: “A society that mistakes material progress, economic progress, and technological progress for moral progress cannot but create monsters and monstrosities.”<sup>13</sup> The instrumentalist, as opposed to moral, view of knowledge that commercialisation fosters not only threatens social good, but also invites us to reexamine whether, as historian David Edgerton

argues, commercially-mediated transfer of knowledge really does create the social change we actually desire.<sup>14</sup>

The economic and technological pressures of commercialisation and their harm to moral progress are exemplified in the challenges theological education faces across different religions. In the case of Christianity, for example, the commercial need to accredit online theological training has raised strong concerns about ministerial formation. In South Africa, the use of commercially-available courses on theological training proliferated during the 1990s and accelerated in recent years with the onset of online modes of teaching. As Kelebogile T. Resane notes, this has led to not only unreliable or even fraudulent Christian ministries being set up across the country but also the “presentation of the Biblical message either as a commodity for sale for material gain or as an object of investment for personal aggrandizement.”<sup>15</sup> Drawing parallel with 20th-century television evangelists such as Billy Graham, Kenneth Copeland, Oral Roberts, and Kenneth Hagin, Resane cites the cases of publically popular South African religious leaders such as Bishop Keith Hurrington and Archbishop Prof. Emanuel Ketsekile to highlight this concern. Both Hurrington and Ketsekile claim scholarship from fictitious or unaccredited institutions, and award doctorates “to many naïve pastors.”<sup>16</sup>

## Commercialisation: between the learner, learning, and knowledge

It can be argued that no matter what its outcomes, the commercialisation of knowledge fundamentally changes the relationships between the learner, learning, and knowledge. In *The Teacher’s Soul and the Terrors of Performativity*, Stephen J. Ball argues that the commodification of knowledge “de-socialises” these relationships. Instead of meaningfully engaging with students, teachers “perform” according to targets, indicators, and evaluations. As “performative” and “enterprising” workers, teachers are forced to set aside “personal beliefs and commitments and live an existence of calculation.”<sup>17</sup> This, Ball concludes, leads to a loss of real relationships, particularly within universities. The resulting construction and maintenance of fabrications get in the way of ‘real’ academic work or ‘proper’ learning. If Ball is correct, then the humanities, and within it the study of theology and religion, have a bleak future in the midst of commercialisation. As Julia Reinhard Lupton argues, “at the heart of the humanities ... lies a withdrawal from utility.”<sup>18</sup> Universities need to be able to broker the relationships - between the learner, learning, and knowledge - that enable this pursuit of knowledge for the sake of knowledge.



# The division and disappearance of knowledge

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*Written by Muhammad Faisal Khalil*



The humanities are disappearing. Many attribute this to the rise of neoliberalism, arguing that the emphasis on knowledge as economic capital rather than human capital has shifted what is accepted as higher education.<sup>1</sup> This retreat from the humanities, as Kerr asserts, has not only led to the prioritisation of vocational and professional studies, but also greater and greater specialisation within the arts and sciences.<sup>2</sup> The emphasis on narrow specialisation for economic ends has led to the loss of broad-based education, and also the loss of “learning for its own sake rather than utilitarian ends.”<sup>3</sup> The increasing inability of students and researchers to appreciate knowledge in this broader and epistemically sincere way inhibits the discovery of the strong links that unexpectedly exist between not only different realms of knowledge but also between the people and the world outside.

## “The beautiful soul”

This concern was historically expressed by German academics, who feared that specialisation would lead to a collapse of personal integrative knowledge, and with it the connection between *Wissenschaft*, scientific and non-scientific inquiry, and *Weltanschauung*, the comprehensive apprehension of the world.<sup>4</sup> They defended the German concept of *Bildung*, which meant education for ‘self-cultivation’ or ‘self-development’ based on the individuality of what Georg Simmel called ‘the soul’.<sup>5</sup> The final outcome of *Bildung* would, therefore, be *die schöne Seele*, ‘the beautiful soul’.<sup>6</sup> Not

dissimilar from the English idea of ‘character building’, *Bildung* was therefore a call-to-action for ‘every kind of learning, virtuosity, refinement in man’.<sup>7</sup>

The absence of *Bildung*’s distinctly aesthetic approach towards knowledge is most strongly felt in the instrumentalist approach currently prevalent in universities. A survey by the Pew Research Center in the US showed that 52 percent of college graduates believe “the main purpose of college is to help individuals grow personally and intellectually.”<sup>8</sup> This sounds very much like a desire for *Bildung*’s ‘self-cultivation’ or ‘self-development’. Notwithstanding this desire, research shows that the average graduate in science-oriented vocational or professional speciality ‘is exposed to virtually no liberal arts knowledge beyond that taught in natural science courses’<sup>9</sup> and ‘are not exposed to much in terms of broad artistic or literary aesthetics’.<sup>10</sup>

## The humanities as a manifesto for democracy

This lack of individual self-cultivation is also the cause of collective harms. In *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, American philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum argues that nations should promote humane, people-sensitive democracy dedicated to people’s “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”<sup>11</sup> The key way for this to be possible, she argues, is that schools develop students’ capacity to imagine the viewpoint of others, particularly those who are marginalised.<sup>12</sup> The key to Nussbaum’s manifesto for democracy is the

humanities. She writes:

*“If we do not insist on the crucial importance of the humanities and the arts, they will drop away, because they do not make money. They only do what is much more precious than that, make a world that is worth living in, people who are able to see other human beings as full people, with thoughts and feelings of their own that deserve respect and empathy, and nations that are able to overcome fear and suspicion in favour of sympathetic and reasoned debate.”<sup>13</sup>*

## The disappearance of the humanities

Nussbaum’s caution that the humanities “will drop away, because they do not make money”<sup>14</sup> has already come true in the UK. The British Academy reported that the study of theology and religion in the UK is “disappearing from our universities.”<sup>15</sup> Since the increase in university tuition fees by the Conservative government, the number of students studying theology and religion in the UK has fallen sharply, while several university theology departments or institutions, including the UK’s only specialist theological institution, the Heythrop College, were shut down.<sup>16</sup> Professor Roger Kain FBA, Vice-President of Research and Higher

Education Policy at the British Academy, echoed Nussbaum’s caution: “This report comes at a critical time for Theology and Religious Studies. Not only are the subjects’ popularity on the wane but the problem is confounded by the profile of their teaching staff; if more ethnically and gender diverse groups do not rise through the ranks, there is a danger that these highly relevant disciplines disappear from our universities.”<sup>17</sup>

Despite its profound role in ensuring democracy, the disappearance of the humanities is oddly the result of the rise of ‘democratic’ education after the Second World War. With the economically and politically driven demands for education for everyone – mass education – in North America and Europe, it can be argued that the quantity and outreach of education increased but not its substance.<sup>18</sup> The right to education was ‘used’ for the purposes of bureaucratic and managerial revolutions during the early 20th century and neoliberalism since the late 20th century.<sup>19</sup> Investments in education were consistently less about human capital and more about economic capital, leading to the rise of increasingly specialised vocational and professional studies, and with it, the loss of the *values*, as Nussbaum emphasises,<sup>20</sup> that made meaningful electoral democracies possible.

## De-zoning knowledge

As die *Geisteswissenschaften*, 'the sciences of the spirit', the humanities can play a central role in the development of both individuals and societies. A key opportunity to elevate the humanities would be to pursue the *Bildung* call-to-action. This would help 'de-zone' the currently divided – and fragmented – knowledge so that a broad-based education is possible. It would also help rescue the humanities from its marginal position to vocational and professional studies and make it possible to extend knowledge beyond nature or numbers, to humanity. This humane, people-sensitive emphasis on knowledge, therefore, will elevate an alternative human development model which does not assume that economic growth leads to political and democratic participation. This model allows people to appreciate the values, emotions, and sentiments necessary to cultivate themselves while also imagining the situations of others.



# The (im)moral use of knowledge in the university and Jurassic Park

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*Written by R. Anthony Buck*





\*\*\* Donald Gennaro and John Hammond chuckling over a joke about having “a coupon day” \*\*\*

Dr Ian Malcolm: “If I may, if I may. Uh, I’ll tell you the problem with the scientific power that you’re, that you’re using here. It didn’t require any discipline to attain it. You know, you read what others had done, and you, and you took the next step. You didn’t earn the knowledge for yourselves, so you don’t take any responsibility... for it. You stood on the shoulders of geniuses, uh, to accomplish something as fast as you could, and before you even knew it, you had, you’ve patented it, and packaged it, and slapped it on a plastic lunch box, and now [\*bangs the table\*] you’re selling it, you wanna sell it, well.”

John Hammond: “I don’t think you’re giving us our due credit. Our scientists have done things which nobody has ever done before.”

Ian Malcolm: “Yeah, yeah, but your scientists were so preoccupied over whether or not they could, they didn’t stop to think if they *should*.”

This iconic scene from 1993’s *Jurassic Park* foreshadows the disastrous events that will soon transpire in the course of just a few hours.<sup>1</sup> At the heart of this brief interaction is the question of knowledge and whether knowledge requires more than just itself to be used morally. To place it in the starker terms of the Jurassic universe, leaves us with a startling question: what if knowledge (perhaps especially scientific knowledge) that is 1) held in abstract, 2) exalted as a power unto itself, and 3) neither given any reflection about how it should be used nor considered to need that reflection is not a recipe for progress but only for disaster?

Perhaps what we are asking in simpler terms than Dr Ian Malcolm is this: can you separate knowledge from ethics? Can you have a process of knowing without a process of reflection on what you should do with that knowledge?

### Science: a new sola fide?

Nearly 30 years ago, Dr Malcolm’s character raised an essential issue about how scientific power or knowledge relates to the real world. The growing public push for greater focus on STEM subjects at schools/universities (i.e. subjects related to Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics)<sup>2,3</sup> combined with dropping funding for humanities-related departments<sup>4</sup> and waves of humanities departments being cut<sup>5,6,7</sup> only highlights this issue, especially now as the financial

effects of COVID-19 hit the universities.<sup>8</sup> A world with a preponderance of science-related fields as the humanities wither away in many universities is a reality some believe is already underway. Yet, Malcolm’s character raises perhaps the greatest danger of an overly scientific educational structure, one where the question is always about how something can be done and not so much about whether it should be done.

Science obviously offers many great things to the world. Few of the people concerned about a possible eclipse of the humanities fields in the academy and society would want to strip science from the university or even disenfranchise students from becoming scientists of various kinds contributing their important work and creative solutions to the world. This beneficial aspect of the various sciences cannot be overlooked.

However, the question is not so much whether science should be in the university, but whether it should be alone in the university. Physicist turned philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn, decades earlier than *Jurassic Park*, exposes that science has its own outlook on the world and, more importantly, its own kind of epistemology (a theory on how one comes to know and also knows that one knows as well as how a person relates to knowledge).<sup>9</sup>

The epistemology he identifies is not just dismissive of other disciplines but even its own discipline's past theories:

*“Why should progress also be the apparently universal concomitant of scientific revolutions? ... Revolutions close with a total victory for one of the two opposing camps. Will that group ever say that the result of its victory has been something less than progress? ... To them, at least, the outcome of revolution must be progress, and they are in an excellent position to make certain the future members of their community will see past history in the same way. ... Scientific education makes use of no equivalent for the art museum or the library of classics, and the result is a sometimes drastic distortion in the scientist's perception of his discipline's past. More than the practitioners of other creative fields, ... he comes to see it as progress. No alternative is available to him while he remains in the field.”*

In other words, science not only thinks that its methodology is superior to the humanities' methodology for coming to know something and knowing that one knows something. It orients itself towards its own knowledge as if that is all there is and all it would ever need. Moreover, it cannot consider previously dominant theories as places where there is

truth, or even something insightful to the present, *per se*, because the present theories are *the* theories. Kuhn calls a change from one theory to another a revolution, not just because the change of perspective is seen as revolutionary, but because it entails a revolution against the previous theory and leaves little evidence of the previous theory's existence when complete. Moreover, scientific fields tend to be incredibly restrictive on who they allow to know what when.

*“In these fields the student relies mainly on textbooks until, in his third or fourth year of graduate work, he begins his own research. ... Until the very last stages in the education of a scientist, textbooks are systematically substituted for the creative scientific literature that made them possible. ... Of course, it is a narrow and rigid education, probably more so than any other....”*

Kuhn's objection here is that scientific disciplines tend not to inculcate the virtue of critical thinking or questioning the status quo as much as they often think or claim themselves to. Rather, the educational method suggests an incredibly dogmatic outlook on the world through science without the necessary information or skills to sufficiently challenge that dogmatism. The skills it cultivates are not about thinking about what knowledge is or what it is for, but about finding and

using what it assumes counts as knowledge. Or to put it more provocatively, Kuhn is concerned that science left on its own will just reduce to the discipline of special interests, of commodification and commercialisation, and finally to academic politics, but without a reflexive enough orientation (either towards the world or themselves) to notice.

## The virtues of knowledge

This is precisely Dr Malcolm's critique of John Hammond and his team: they are so hungry to make 'scientific progress' at all costs and then profit from it that they never truly come to knowledge with the kind of respect it warrants. He pushes along a similar vein to Kuhn suggesting that science cannot be separated from *scientists*. Right after Donald cracks his joke about 'coupon day', Malcolm interjects:

Ian Malcolm: “The lack of humility before nature that's being displayed here, um, staggers me.”

Donald Gennaro: “Thank you Dr. Malcolm, but I think things are a little bit different than both you and I have feared.”

Ian Malcolm: “Yeah, I know. They're uh, a lot worse.”

Donald Gennaro: “Now, wait a second now. We haven't even seen the park yet. There's no reason--”

John Hammond: “Donald, Donald, let him talk. There's no reason -- I want to hear every viewpoint. I really do.”

Ian Malcolm: “Yeah, don't you see the danger, John, inherent in what you're doing here? Genetic power's the most awesome force this planet's ever seen, but you wield it like a kid who's found his dad's gun.”

The danger of separating knowledge from a reflective orientation towards that knowledge, from being the kind of person that is ready for and suited to that knowledge, is precisely that knowledge is so powerful. Playing with it could be far more dangerous than the knower may realise. Malcolm is warning of a kind of naivety that Kuhn fears science is extremely susceptible to. It is not enough to be able to know something or even know how to do something; it matters just as much whether one is able to be the kind of person who can know whether they should know it or do it.

The humanities, however, are not immune from just this sort of epistemology. It is just as easy for someone in the humanities and social sciences to not even consider whether they are the kind of person who can be trusted with knowledge.<sup>10</sup> Philosophers, historians,

theologians, activists, journalists, etc. are just as able to turn knowledge into a tool, a trophy, or a weapon as scientists. Dr Malcolm is warning against a certain way of orienting to knowledge, of making knowledge so much the kind of thing that you gain and wield that it ceases to matter whether you *should* say it, write it, or use it - it only matters whether you *can*.

That said, Malcolm and Kuhn have not just warned about human capacity to use knowledge without regard for whether it should. They have also signalled that the mode and style of formation involved in acquiring knowledge cannot be separated from knowing what to do with it. Malcolm warns that Hammond and his scientists have not been formed to be the kind of people who can use the knowledge well because of the way that they have learned it. This is also what concerns Kuhn, that scientists are being formed by their scientific education to be the kind of people who only ask and value scientific kinds of questions, and therefore answers without an awareness of how their human inclinations, motives, and politics shape their science. The educational mode itself is narrow and so focused that while they might learn the skills needed to learn or develop science, they do not seem likely to develop into the kind of people in the process who can be trusted to know, they fail to cultivate the kind of rationality that is morally and sociologically reflexive.

This is a risk for the humanities just as it is for STEM. But the humanities as a set of disciplines have a greater in-built orientation towards reflexively asking the right questions of itself to help both people and the disciplines become the kind that do not just know

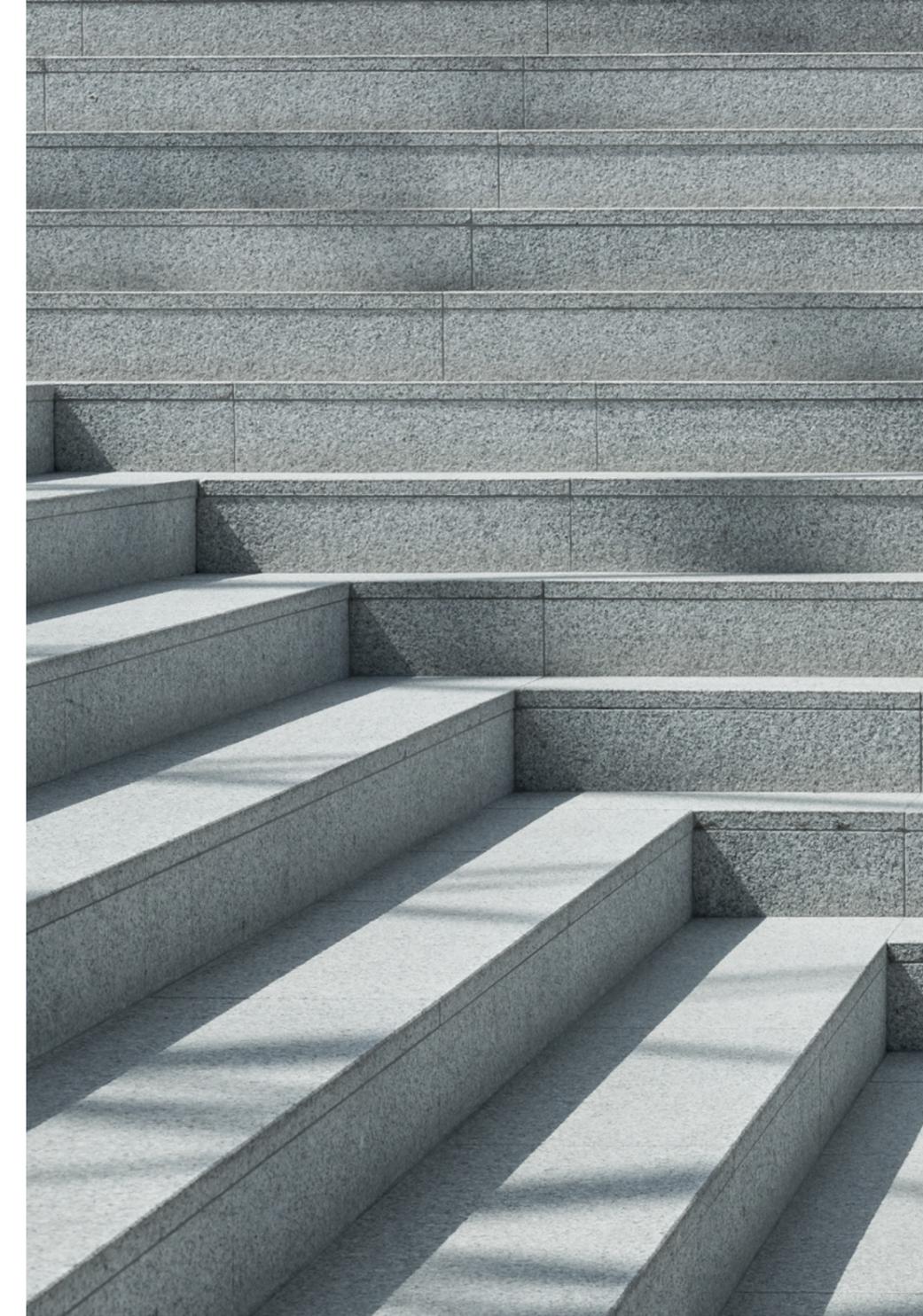
information but know the questions that need to be asked of it.<sup>11 12 13 14 15 16</sup> The humanities are not just about knowledge, but about virtues of knowledge. The humanities are about teaching people what knowledge is for and not just what it is. Moreover, the humanities are concerned with how being human relates to knowledge. They look at themselves. They have categories for greed, pride, courage, and hope. They have not just the categories of true/false but good/evil. Likewise, as Kuhn points out, the humanities are not just concerned with the theories of the present, but of the past and of the possible. The kind of education they provide integrates many kinds of learning, disciplines, and perspectives. Because of these features, the humanities involve a mode of learning that better helps a person become someone who can be trusted with knowledge. Thus, it has something unique to offer not just to itself but to the university as whole including the sciences and other disciplines.

Humanities offer a kind of knowledge production that is sensitive to epistemic and social reflexivity, that is, to enabling moral reflection and refinement of modes of rationality operative in the diverse domains of use. Science cannot ask whether something is good, just whether something is possible; business cannot ask whether a product or its production is good, just whether it is profitable. The humanities can ask however exactly what Dr Malcolm thought was necessary. Not just "Is this knowable?" or even "How can I know or do such-and-such?" but also "Am I the kind of person who should know it? Can I be trusted to use this knowledge for good?"

## Is being able to ask the question the beginning of an answer?

But someone might ask: the humanities claim they have the only form of rationality which can operate with moral reflexivity. But what if this is only the expression of its (subconscious?) interest in controlling all forms of knowledge production? This would make it just like other forms of knowledge production that seem to be interested in controlling all the forms of knowledge production. In other words, are the humanities just using their rationality to grab power in the academy and/or society?

That is an important question: but it would seem only the rationality operative and constitutive of the humanities is capable of even asking such a question. The intuitive value of such a question already admits the importance of the mode of rationality at home in the humanities and suggests that the humanities really are aptly named, for they are the expression of a form of human rationality generating and generated by the nature of being human itself.



# Humanities and the challenge of totalitarianism

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*Written by Muhammad Faisal Khalil*





The Central European University (CEU) is a private research university known for its strength in the humanities as well as the social sciences<sup>1</sup>. Funded by an endowment from George Soros, the central tenet of the CEU was the promotion of 'open societies'.<sup>2</sup> Only months after Harvard academic Michael Ignatieff became the fifth president and rector of the CEU on 5 May 2016, the Hungarian government challenged the university's legal right to continue to operate in Hungary.<sup>3</sup> Ignatieff and the CEU saw the challenge not only as Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's vendetta against Soros himself, but as part of a much wider authoritarian attack by Hungary's conservative right against democratic ideals.<sup>4</sup> On 3 December 2018, the CEU announced its departure from Budapest, relocating to Vienna.<sup>5</sup>

## The CEU vs. Hungary

The Hungarian government's shutdown of the CEU triggered a wave of protest and solidarity from academics and politicians worldwide. On 6 October 2020, in a case brought by the European Commission, the European Court of Justice, Europe's highest court, ruled that the shutdown not only violated Hungary's commitments under the WTO, but also the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union "relating to academic freedom, the freedom to found higher education institutions and the freedom to conduct a business."<sup>6</sup> Ignatieff supported the ruling as a landmark for "the cause of academic freedom and

institutional autonomy in Europe."<sup>7</sup> The case of the CEU vs. Hungary represents a present-day iteration of the long challenge the humanities have faced from totalitarianism. Orbán's government has been described as an 'illiberal democracy': despite competitive elections, the government has - in the words of Ignatieff himself - "perfected a system of control in which people have enough private freedom so that it prevents them demanding public freedom."<sup>8</sup> Not identical to the totalitarian regimes of the 50s and 60s, it still delivers comparable state interventions that reduce political freedom significantly enough to end pluralism in society and politics.<sup>9</sup>

## Free minds for free society

But why do the humanities face opposition from totalitarianism? While totalitarianism can be understood as "the principle of government according to which all institutional and private arrangements are subject to control by the state,"<sup>10</sup> the humanities represent the "subjects and disciplines dedicated to the study of humanity and its creations, such as fine art, philosophy, history, languages, drama, literature, and music."<sup>11</sup> Many argue that the humanities, with their scrutiny of what is understood to be true, are a precondition to political freedom. Only free minds can build a free society. In a speech, *An education for freedom*, A. Bartlett Giamatti, president of Yale University from 1978

to 1986, elaborated this claim, "the best way . . . to combat indoctrination by any system that would exclude or master others as slaves is to promote a view of education that is not intended to indoctrinate. Such an education would constantly test, rather than impose, the values it cherishes and would posit seeking the truth — not simply propounding the truth — as its goal. Such an education is a process, not a closed and static system of beliefs, and its goal is to free the mind rather than enclose it."<sup>12</sup> Giamatti concluded that "at the heart of the humanities lives the conviction that freedom of thought is the necessary precondition to political freedom."<sup>13</sup> It can be argued, therefore, that the humanities are necessary to the work of leaders and citizens in democratic societies. It offers them the values and capacity "to discuss, negotiate and compromise — that is, to employ the tolls of democracy."<sup>14</sup> As Ronald J. Daniels, the president of Johns Hopkins University, elaborates in *Don't Underestimate The Value Of Humanities*, the humanities provide opportunities for students to learn critical thinking, self-reflection, creativity, empathy, tolerance, and communication skills — qualities that are useful in the full spectrum of one's life, including professional, personal, and civic pursuits.<sup>15</sup> These qualities, as American philosopher Martha Nussbaum highlights, also prompt people to develop qualities associated with responsible citizenship.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to fostering a free society, the humanities have also offered direct resistance to totalitarianism.

This has been most strongly felt in Europe and North America with the works of the German-born American political theorist Hannah Arendt and the German Frankfurt School. Arendt's arguments about the ordinariness of totalitarianism, with her accounts of commonplace obedience<sup>17</sup> and organised loneliness,<sup>18</sup> have functioned as profound reminders of society's susceptibility to totalitarianism. Her arguments, for example, amply warn us that the rise of right-wing populism in Europe and the United States may lead to new forms of authoritarianism. Her works have also represented an ongoing project for freedom. While arguing for art as political in *The Crisis in Culture*, for example, Arendt argued that art's freedom requires other freedoms to also exist, such as freedom for a diversity of perspectives within public life.<sup>19</sup> The Frankfurt School also yielded influential critiques of totalitarianism, which as Raffaele Laudani reminds us in *Secret Reports on Nazi Germany: The Frankfurt School Contribution to the War Effort*, helped set out proposals for effective struggle against German fascism.<sup>20</sup> Herbert Marcuse's subsequent critique of capitalism's increasing control of all aspects of social life arguably both extended the Frankfurt School's resistance to totalitarianism and further reinforced Arendt's case for the ordinariness of totalitarianism. Jürgen Habermas's Frankfurt School efforts also further opened up the intervention of the humanities into the rethinking of political life in postwar Europe. Habermas, like Arendt, advocated for post-national forms of political community to overcome the totalitarian and violent legacy of nationalism.<sup>21</sup>

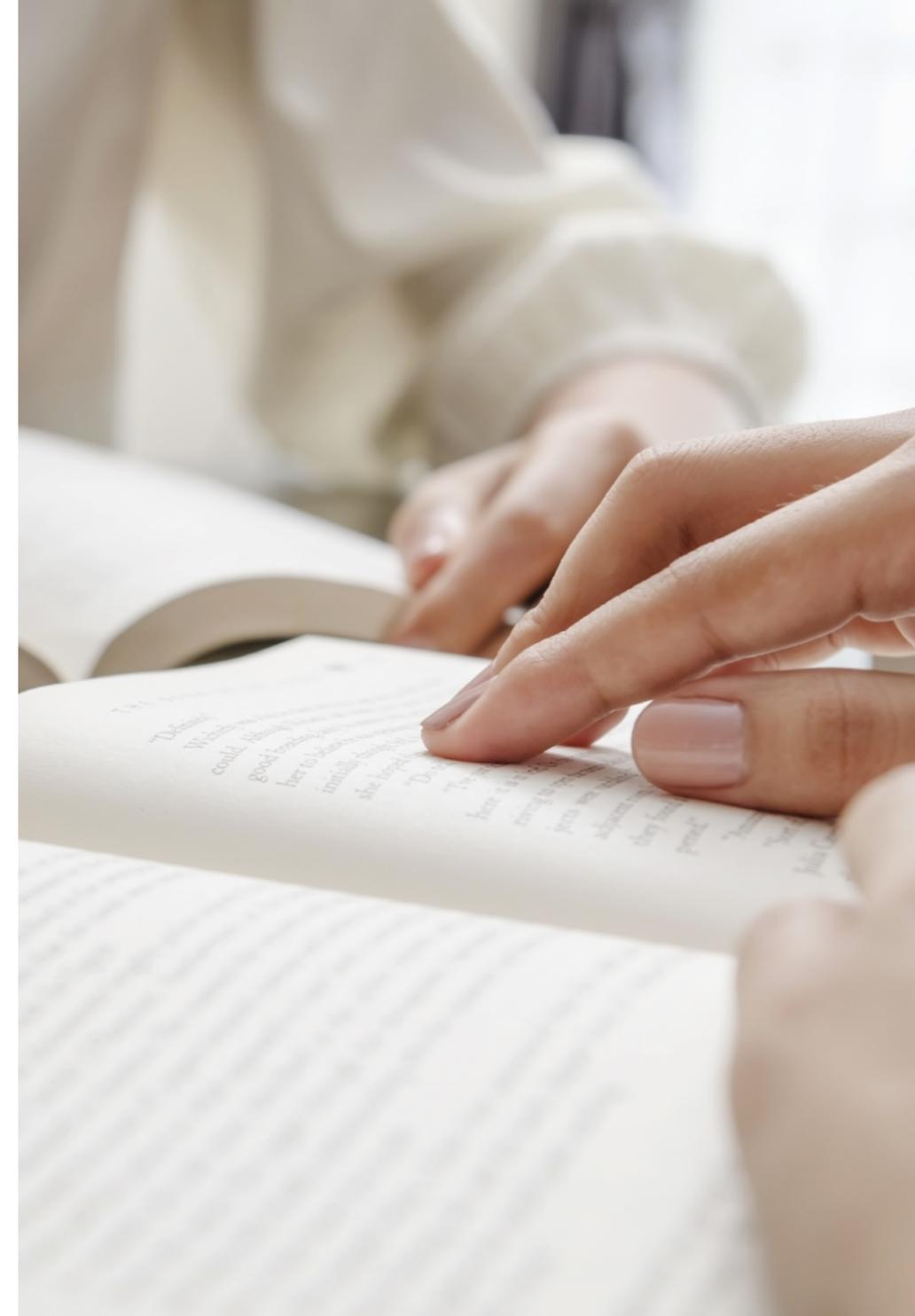
## Studying God in the midst of totalitarianism

What can we say about the specific case of the study of theology and religion in a totalitarian setting? Can the study of theology and religion survive totalitarianism? Broadly speaking, it can be argued that intervention of the state in institutional and private arrangements deeply undermines the independent place of religion in society. Eric Voegelin, for example, claimed that politics substitutes religion with the concept of *politischen Religionen* or 'political religion', which he invented to describe totalitarian regimes. In effect, he showed that totalitarianism seeks to take over religion's "relationship between mankind and the sacred in one form or another"<sup>22</sup> in order to deliver its transformational politics. The resulting contest between religion and totalitarianism was palpable in postwar Poland, where the Roman Catholic Church became a source of opposition to the communist authorities. Less than a year after the fall of the communist order in Poland, the Church moved to exert considerable pressure on the government to re-establish religious education in the country.<sup>23</sup>

Notwithstanding this, the study of theology and religion has suffered whether there has been totalitarianism or not. It has been at the hands of religious institutions themselves. The late Hans Küng, controversial Swiss Catholic theologian and president of the Global Ethic Foundation, had his 'missio canonica', the license needed to teach Roman Catholic theology, withdrawn by the Church in 1979.<sup>24</sup> He

was never able to teach as a Catholic theologian at Catholic universities. Both Küng's treatment and his post-Nietzschean theology highlight the challenge intellectual freedom faced from the Church, and spurred him to question whether "this Pope [Pope John Paul II] from a country [Poland] with a totalitarian regime, with a closed authoritarian church, will in all instances be a guarantor of freedom and openness in our church."<sup>25</sup> On an American lecture tour in 1983, he went even further to compare Catholicism to communism. "Are not both," he asked, "absolutist, centralist, totalitarian, in short, enemies of human freedom?"<sup>26</sup> Notwithstanding his controversial positions, Küng's case illustrates how the study of theology and religion needs freedom to survive, if not flourish.

Another threat to the study of theology and religion is the commercialisation of education. In the UK, the study of theology and religion is at significant risk of "disappearing from our universities."<sup>27</sup> The British Academy reported a sharp decline in student numbers, with about 6,500 fewer students on such degree courses in 2017-18 than six years ago, when fees by the Conservative Government were increased. This decline has since led to the closure of several university theology departments as well as the UK's specialist theological institution, Heythrop College, which was founded in 1614. Professor Roger Kain FBA, Vice-President of Research and Higher Education Policy at the British Academy, said: "This report comes at a critical time for Theology and Religious Studies. Not



only are the subjects' popularity on the wane but the problem is confounded by the profile of their teaching staff; if more ethnically and gender diverse groups do not rise through the ranks, there is a danger that these highly relevant disciplines disappear from our universities."<sup>28</sup>

## The humanities as anti-totalitarian

The disappearance of university theology departments in the UK is a concerning development, particularly in the context of rising religious extremism which variously shares the totalist features of 20th-century totalitarianism. Sir Diarmaid MacCulloch FBA, Professor of the History of the Church at the University of Oxford, highlights why this matters: "Despite the rise of secularism in the West, religion continues to play a dominant role in the world stage. Religious extremism, religion-infused nationalism, and tension between religious communities are just some of the many challenges we face today. Religion is more, not less, relevant than ever before, and the study of it should reflect this. As an academic community, we must strive to ensure that our Theology and Religious Studies reflect the world they seek to explain."<sup>29</sup> So while the humanities, and within it the study of theology and religion, do struggle to survive in totalitarian settings, it is also important to note that the humanities are a potentially powerful source of opposition and critique against totalitarian politics. To return to Küng's theology, "all spiritual and cultural traditions at their best are healthily anti-totalitarian."<sup>30</sup> Maintaining the humanities may be the best chance we may have against totalitarianism.



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