

## Humane Learning and the Future of the United States

Discussions of the future, especially when joined with discussions of humane learning, often become apocalyptic, prophesizing either deliverance or downfall, depending on the prophet's mood. Let us not be attracted by visions in which either heaven or hell is brought to earth. Men have a mixed essence, neither angel nor demon, neither good nor evil; they are continually burdened with the responsibility to distinguish as they can between the better and the worse. And humane learning, of a piece with the human learner, works likewise with the better and the worse. Thus the role of humane learning is not to purify the human essence, but to make small yet real improvements in its mix. Should humane learning mysteriously disappear, the future of the United States would be a little worse; should humane learning meet its public responsibilities, our future might be a little better. A more glorious cause I cannot proclaim, but the human meaning of real distinctions between the better and the worse can be very deep, as deep as life and death, so let us not be daunted.

About the worse prospect, I am confident: I do not think that humane learning is about to disappear. To be sure, dark visions could be conjured forth. The long-term move towards universal literacy has slowed as the goal has been approached and has in recent years perhaps regressed a bit. And the long-term concentration on literacy has not been a clear boon to literateness. A new barbarism, a coming dark age, can be seriously forecast: much in our culture is crass; much in our education mindless; the human prospect is portentous in the extreme, at least as Robert Heilbroner and others of like mind ponder it. We should always remember the prospect of doom, chaos, destruction, trembling at the maw of nothingness; without this fear, the Faulknerian grit--that man will endure--becomes facile optimism, and humane learning loses its humanity, the struggle with finitude. We struggle with finitude from within it, dwelling not on its implacable bounds, but on the opportunities for life, for humanity, that exist within the bounds. The worse is an insufficiency of the better--let us seek the latter to avoid the former.

About the better prospect, I am less confident: I am not sure that humane learning is about to meet its public responsibilities, for neither the public nor the learned seem very clear about the nature of

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these responsibilities. The public never is, and when it has thought it was, it has been wrong, promulgating official cultures, all of which, regardless of ideology, share the flaw of sterility. Sometimes, however, the learned have been clear about their responsibilities, and these have been among the better times historically, better not necessarily measured numerically--numbers do not count consecutively to infinity--but better as measured from within, qualitatively, as the historic times by virtue of which men can say that they have so far perdured. Thus, let us say, with the circularity characteristic and proper to our finite condition, that the first public responsibility of humane learning is to be clear about its public responsibilities.

Life is defined by polarities that are at once simultaneous in their presence and successive in their dominance. Whether such polarities are definitive by virtue of the dialectical nature of the mind that does the defining, or by virtue of the nature of the objective realm of which the life defined is a part, I do not care to debate. I want instead to take merely as a given method for my further reflections the conviction that all aspects of life, including the life of humane learning, are understood through polarities, both poles of which are always present in experience yet one or the other pole of which is at any particular time dominant. "We do not achieve greatness," Pascal observed, "by going to one extreme or the other, but by touching both at once and occupying all the intervening space."

Learning in relation to action, I think, is defined by a polarity in learning between the technical and the humane, and by one in action between direct action and indirect action. Technical knowledge develops primarily through applying the principle of cause and effect to concrete cases, understanding particular things causally as they succeed one another in time. Humane learning, in contrast, is acquired primarily by using what Kant called the principle of reciprocity to comprehend the diverse interrelationships among things, evaluating the reciprocal influences at work between things as they coexist in time and space. The polarity between direct and indirect action closely relates to this polarity between technical and humane learning. Direct action is based on hypotheses about particular causes and effects. The person relying on direct action has a particular end in view and he acts, with little regard for side-effects, on particulars

to cause the desired result. Indirect action is based on a sense for the complicated reciprocities working among a broad range of things. The person using indirect action has a general purpose and he acts, taking as much as possible into consideration, so that the over-all configuration of influences may be more conducive to his fundamental purposes, even though the immediate consequences of his acts, understood narrowly in a rigorous causal manner, may be relatively minor.

Examples of direct and indirect action can be found in most any sphere of action: both are present, for in experience both poles in any real polarity are always simultaneously present to one or another degree. Take a field most, in one capacity or another, are familiar with, say education. For the teacher there is direct action: the effort today to impart to these particular students this particular skill. In this effort, a good deal of technical knowledge of didactics, psychology, classroom experience, will be important. For the same teacher, there is also indirect action: the effort day-in and day-out to elicit with the class and the school a humane, positive environment, one conducive to a sense of competence and a love of learning in all involved. In this effort, a great deal of comprehension, a sense for the interrelationship of diverse matters, many of which may be very minor from the didactic point of view, will be important. The great teacher, as Pascal implied, will occupy both these poles at once --in all polarities, both poles must be simultaneously present--but to do so, the teacher must make one or the other pole at a particular time dominant. Thus the actual teacher must start with one or the other pole, dealing with the recessive concern in relation to the dominant, designing his direct actions at instruction as part of his plan of indirect action to improve the cultural ethos of the classroom and the school, or attending to his indirect actions with reference to the ethos as an aspect of his program of direct didactic action. This matter of dominance and recessiveness is crucial to what I have to say: it is the only way finite beings can occupy both extremes at once and it is the reason why they are continuously tempted to go to one extreme or the other.

Wherever we can identify polarities, both poles are simultaneously present, but dominance lies with one or the other. No direct action can really be taken for itself alone, for it inevitably has indirect consequences, which result whether or not they are

taken into account; and no set of indirect consequences can be engendered without doing something, many things, directly in an effort to cause this or that in particular. By the same token, so system of understanding a particular cause and effect technically can actually be isolated from the reciprocal influence of all that coexists in reality with it, just as no effort to comprehend the great web of reciprocal influences in the universe, to grasp the principle that steers all things through all things, as Heraclitus put it, can proceed far without noting the causal effect of this thing on that thing. Yet, although simultaneous, an alteration occurs in which one or the other pole is dominant. We stand on two feet, but move by putting our weight primarily on one foot and using the other in relation to it until our balance shifts and the turn of the other comes to be dominant.

By and large, in the recent history of Western civilization, say during the past one hundred years or so, perhaps for a good deal longer, direct action and technical knowledge have been the dominant poles, while indirect action and humane learning have been recessive, that is, present to be sure, but somewhat subsidiary to the dominant poles. The case for this proposition is, I think, quite strong, consisting in detailing the growing influence of causal analysis in the natural and social sciences and the direct application of such knowledge in highly organized, programmatic efforts at actions designed to achieve particular, positive results. Examples could be drawn from most every walk of life, from the government and military, through business and labor, to education and culture. My main concern here, however, is not so much to document this case--I will leave that to historians of Burckhardtian temper. My concern is to assert the over-all view with the hope that it will help illuminate the current public responsibilities of humane learning.

For now, we need grant things only as plausible hypotheses, for instance, the proposition that indirect action and humane learning have for some time been recessive poles in relation to the dominant concerns of direct action and technical knowledge. This formulation connects humane learning in its public role most closely with indirect action, and with that the public responsibilities of humane learning begin to be illuminated. When direct action is the dominant pole of action, those in whom humane learning resides are tempted to lose faith in their proper mode of action, to give up the conviction that indirect action

make any difference. When this conviction is lost, there develops a traison des clerics of one form or another, in all of which the practioners of humane learning seek to convert their understanding of the web of reciprocal influence into a pseudo-positive system that can be applied after the fashion of technical knowledge through direct action. Such temptation will never be fully resisted, but insofar as possible it should be resisted, and the way to do that is not so much in decrying the abuse, but in displaying and cultivating the proper use, that is in understanding and pursuing the relation of humane learning to indirect action. As a prelude to doing that, let us dwell for a time on a polarity within humane learning itself.

Humane learning, the life of humane learning, that is, seems to be defined internally by a polarity, at once simultaneous and successive, between the esoteric and the exoteric. There is, always, I would contend, an esoteric side to humane learning because it is in e-sence a highly developed system of learning, which, however open to all, will and can be, given human imperfection, mastered by but a few. At the same time, by virtue of its humaneness, humane learning will always be reaching out in search of ways to touch all with its significances, and thus it always has an exoteric pole. The analogous polarity within technical knowledge is one, I think, between theory and application, but the internal character of technical knowledge is of no great concern to us here, so we can leave it aside to explore the implications of the polarity between the esoteric and the exoteric within humane learning.

Now to proceed in that exploration, the discussion must become a little complicated, so I beg your attention. The intellectual enterprise is defined by a polarity between technical knowledge and humane learning, between the analysis of cause and effect, and the evaluation of reciprocal influence. Within the intellectual enterprise, both these poles are always present, but one or the other is at any time dominant. Humane learning itself is defined by a subsidiary polarity between the esoteric and the exoteric, and as always, both these poles are simultaneously present, but one or the other is at any time dominant. Further, both the esoteric and the exoteric have a polarity subsidiary to each of them. For the esoteric, it is a polarity between preservation and integration; for the exoteric it is one between prophecy and persuasion. With these sub-

sidary polarities, the character of the esoteric and the exoteric within humane learning can vary significantly, according to whether humane learning, in the polarity between itself and technical knowledge is dominant or recessive. Thus, when technical knowledge is dominant in the polarity with humane learning, the esoteric is dominant in relation to the exoteric and within the esoteric preservation of the varieties of human accomplishments has precedence over the integration of their human significance, and within the exoteric, prophecy against the failings of the prevailing ethos preponderates over persuasion aimed at leavening the ethos from within with new formative principles. When, however, the over-all dominance alternates and humane learning has the ascendancy, so too does the exoteric, and the esoteric in humane learning accentuates the coherent integration of all within it, and the exoteric drives confidently to persuade, inform, and inspire the ethos, to move men, to instil hope, to impart conviction, to invite commitment, to abet accomplishment, to nurture aspirations, to enlist engagement, to induce interest, to foster a future.

Obviously you can see from my rhetoric that my personal predilection is for a humane learning in which the exoteric dominates, but such fundamental relations can be determined by neither predilection nor rhetoric. King Canute could not command the waves. If the fundamental movements of thought and action are on the contrary course, the most persuasive proponents of persuasion cannot help but be prophetic; inevitably they will stand in isolation as their exhortations, by implication, damn the insufficiency of the times for being what they are and for not being what they are not. Men make history from within history; today they fashion tomorrow from what is given by yesterday. The limits on possibility are very strict; they need to be accurately diagnosed, and then, and only then, there may perhaps prove to be a little room for the play of predilection.

Recall that I asserted a bit earlier that presently and for some time, indirect action and humane learning have been recessive poles, while direct action and technical knowledge have been dominant poles. If this historical assessment is correct and if my conception of the polarity within humane learning between the esoteric and the exoteric is sound, then we should find the major esoteric movement in humane learning during the past hundred

years or so to have been an effort at preservation and the major exoteric movement to have been one of prophecy. And this, I submit, has been precisely the case: the main esoteric movement, humane scholarship centered in the universities, has been prodigiously preservative, culling the past for every shard of human creativity, carefully reconstructing, recording, and preserving the human significance of each. At the same time, the main exoteric movement, centered in the creative arts and literature, has been profoundly prophetic, successive waves of modernism hurled at a shocked and incomprehending populace, whose unexamined pieties have been stripped away by the modernist critiques. The accomplishments of both movements have been great, but they have excelled at neither integration nor persuasion; specialization and alienation have been their operative principles.

Turning points do occur, and in them simple projection is a deceptive mode of prognosis. In the recent past and the apparent present, the basic situation seems to have been that just sketched. In the polarity between itself and technical knowledge, humane learning has been the recessive pole. In this condition, the esoteric pole within humane learning has been characterized by a preservative movement conducted by humanistic scholars, and the exoteric pole has been characterized by a prophetic movement conducted by the artistic creators of modernism. With this basic system of polarities, I want now to turn from the broad stroked contemplation of the past that is still so apparent in the present to speculate a bit about a different future that is perhaps latent in this present. I want to look both within humane learning itself and at its ambience, suggesting that for both internal and external reasons an alteration in the basic relations of dominance may be imminent.

To begin with the internal situation: I want to observe, although I do not want to dwell upon the point, how both the preservative and the prophetic movements that have for some time characterized humane learning seem to be approaching the limits of their potentiality. Academically, there are many structural problems that are likely to get worse, fewer jobs than qualified applicants, insufficient budgets, and so on. There is in addition a serious substantive problem, which many do not like to recognize: in the major fields of humanistic scholarship there are not many fresh topics remaining to be worked. Our literary, artistic, architectural, musical, historical, and philosophical heritages are

rather fully identified and critically assessed. It is somewhat difficult, for me at least, to imagine many further lines of truly fundamental advance. This is not to say that humanistic scholarship of a preservative bent will cease, but should it continue as the dominant pole in the esoteric part of humane learning, it is likely to continue, not as a further widening of our humanistic heritage, but as a continuing elaboration and refinement of what is already essentially well-known. Dissertation topics will become ever more obscure and the major critical movements--as witnessed, for instance, first in the move to the new criticism and then to structuralism--ever more esoteric. And as the scholarly, esoteric movement at preservation seems to be reaching limits, beyond which lies Alexandrianism, so too, the prophetic, exoteric movement of modernism seems to have developed to a point beyond which there lies only silence. Who can epater le bourgeois when the only sign left of who is bourgeois is the willingness and ability to pay handsomely for the privilege of being shocked? Both poles of humane learning in its recessive mode appear to have approached fulfillment. This suggests that a change would perhaps be opportune, but such a state does not really depend on the internal state of humane learning. As long as humane learning is made by the over-all situation the recessive pole of the intellectual enterprise, both scholars and artists will probably have to stick to primarily preservation and prophecy, even though they are mindful that it becomes mindless. It has happened before in history.

If we look at the external situation, however, the possibility of a substantial reorientation of polarities can be found, one that might change the character of the esoteric and the exoteric in humane learning. Earlier on, in introducing the polarity between technical knowledge and humane learning, I also introduced a closely related polarity between direct action and indirect action, and I suggested that technical knowledge was the dominant pole in the intellectual realm when direct action was dominant in the active realm. Recall further, that common to technical knowledge and direct action is a reliance on the principle of direct causality, the concern for particular effects that succeed in time from particular causes, while common to humane learning and indirect action is a reliance on the principle of reciprocity, the effort to evaluate the mutual interworking of things that coexist together. We have been in an historic era in which the course of events has been driven by direct action, by diverse, discrete designs

to exploit new technologies for the positive accomplishment of particular, relatively isolated goals. Effort has centered on directly doing this, that, and the other thing more efficiently and effectively. and relatively little effort has centered on managing indirectly the over-all situation that results from the reciprocities between all things.

If we take the major matters on our civic agenda that now call for action, we will find, I think, that they are matters that we can better deal with if indirect action, a concern for acting on complex interrelationships, becomes the dominant active pole and direct action, a concern for particular effects produced by particular causes, becomes the recessive pole. Many of the problems that now call for action are problems precisely because they are not amenable to solution through direct action. Even further, many are problems because diverse previous direct actions, each seemingly good on its own narrow grounds, have side effects that together, in the sum of their reciprocal influences, are destructive or potentially so. As direct action has driven the course of events, it has produced situations that--environmentally, economically, militarily, politically, socially, educationally, culturally--are forcing us to attend far more closely to the complicated interworking of things, to try through indirect action, informed by a comprehension of reciprocities, to preserve stability in the whole. Should this incipient alteration of dominance in the poles of action be completed, a related alteration between the poles of intellect would occur, with humane learning becoming dominant and technical knowledge becoming recessive. And should this alteration occur, we could expect the esoteric pole of humane learning to switch from a primary concern with the preservation of a heritage to one accentuating the integration of the manifold parts of that heritage into a meaningful whole and the exoteric pole to switch from a sustained effort at prophesizing against the prevailing ethos to one of trying to inform that ethos with as humane a sensibility as can be mustered.

Such changes, let me stress, would be changes of emphasis, not of kind, but even as changes of emphasis, they would be significant changes, and, I want to maintain, such changes, although clearly not inevitable, or even, perhaps, probable, are all the same defensibly desirable. Across the gamut of human activity, we find remarkably similar situations: a heritage of remarkably productive direct actions

informed by technical knowledge giving rise to situations in which further advance seems to depend, not so much on finding yet another if-then proposition that can be acted on directly, but on comprehending and modulating how all the going if-then propositions upon which we act interrelate, combine and conflict, and reciprocally condition one another.

Ironically, this situation is perhaps most clearly apparent where the dominance of direct action and technical knowledge has been strongest. Human productivity has been prodigiously increased by direct actions informed by a pragmatically truer technical knowledge. Innovations have come about, not by grand design, but because they promised immediate, direct improvement with respect to particular ends in view. Edison's concern was not to transform how men related to the cycles of day and night, but with his work in his laboratory exploring possible applications of electricity to concrete human needs. This concentration on dealing directly with concrete, particular needs and uses has been multiplied many thousand-fold, many million-fold, with cumulative results so marked that their momentum cannot be sustained. Thus, the realization is fast setting in that with respect to man's place in nature, we cannot rely alone on direct actions and a knowledge of isolated causalities. Ecology, the study of relationships, is fast becoming one of the most dignificant branches of learning, and many of its findings cause dismay, not because they augur implacable doom, but because we have been acculturated to reliance on direct actions, and in that context we feel impotent, dismayed, unable to see what we can do about the complexities through the means of action to which we are accustomed.

Similar situations, although not perhaps quite so apparent, seem to exist in other spheres of activity. For some time we have been able to divide up civic life, to study each part on its own terms, and to pursue unrelated courses of action within each, not worrying too much about the cumulative side-effects of those actions. Now we seem everywhere in direct action to be running up against limits that force choice and conscious restraint and a consideration of interrelationships that previously might have been ignored. This situation can be seen well in actions to improve human health. Our basic model of medicine has for some time been one of direct action based on technical knowledge. Its success has been marvelous. But we are beginning to face the unexpected side-effects of

this pattern, which are manifest, not so much in health statistics, but in health care costs. Men are mortal; the direct effort to postpone mortality could theoretically be made total, consuming the sum of human resources, without it altering the stern law that for every birth there will be a death. Eventually, nay very soon, terribly difficult choices will have to be made concerning how much effort, all things considered, is desirable and what sort of effort is most fruitful. To make these choices a very different kind of understanding will be needed than that by which we cure disease. Far more attention will be paid to indirect actions in relation to health, to helping people understand and nurture the infinitely complicated homeostasis of their bodies and their psyches.

I could rehearse many more such ways in which indirect action, owing to the presence of limits, reciprocities, interrelationships, complexities, is becoming central in matters habitually dealt with through direct action. But I do not do so because I do not want to risk appearing simply to recommend this or that course of action in these matters. You can see such an appearance in what I have said about health: more preventive medicine, more home health care, more medical self-reliance will cause health care costs to stabilize. I fear it is not so simple; I fear we will not do these things or they will not have such effects, unless we alter our basic conception of action. I do not want here to prescribe means to achieve cheaper health care; rather I want to suggest that to deal with problems that press upon us in health, politics, social policy, economics, technology, work and leisure, education, war and diplomacy, we may need again to make indirect action our dominant pole of action.

Doing so will be hard, for in doing so we will not be able to say exactly how it will cause us to get through our problems and we have grown to expect such precision in calls to action. Men cannot ever really say exactly how they will get through their problems, for they are always caught in history and must work step by step within it. In the present historic context, it seems important to recommend a mode of action, not a course of action. Who can see a splendid solution to the complex of problems before us? No one, for no part has an adequate perspective on the whole. Direct action works when a decisive point of intervention can be specified. But the problems before us are of such complexity

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that no particular point of intervention is decisive; with them everything stands in thoroughgoing community, that is, in mutual interaction; they can be dealt with only as many different people some how do diverse particulars in ways that aggregate into historic developments, which in retrospect posterity will wonderingly say were inspired with wisdom.

To engender the likelihood of such an historic development, we need to put some confidence in indirect action--that is the first, indirect act in making indirect action again the dominant pole. We cannot always ask for positive positive solutions. There is no way to cause the principle of reciprocity to have greater weight in action than the principle of causality, and to seek to do so would be to undercut one's purpose by one's choice of means in pursuing it. Taking as many things into consideration as we can, the situation seems conducive to reliance on the principle of reciprocity and indirect action. Whether, in that situation people will in fact give prime concern to indirect action, and whether they can do so successfully, seems to me entirely moot. We cannot cause it to happen, but we can indirectly prepare for it happening, and with that proposition, we return to the question of the public responsibilities of humane learning with a different vision. If people increasingly make indirect action their main mode of action, they will be putting are greater demands on humane learning than at present and expecting from it accomplishments they have not widely expected in the recent past.

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In general, on introducing the over-all conception of polarities, I have already characterized these demands and expectations: when the dominant pole in action switches from direct action to indirect action, the esoteric in humane learning shifts from a concern for preservation to one of integration, and the exoteric shifts from the practice of prophecy to that of persuasion. My characterization, however, was rather abstract, and it would help to give body to our sense of these demands and expectations if I gave an extended example. We are here today at Williamsburg, and that it exists now as such a marvelous reminder of life in colonial times exemplifies the recent power of the impulse toward preservation in humane learning. What it reminds us of, however, is a time, culminating in the work of the founding fathers, when indirect action was dominant. Then preservation and prophecy were not the main concerns of humane learning; then integration and persuasion were the main concerns.

Indirect action was dominant during our colonial, revolutionary, and constitutional eras. This is not to say that little direct action was undertaken, for patently much was. But it was generally undertaken, not only with attention to its immediate consequences, but with a great deal of attention to its indirect effects. Men saw themselves as creating an over-all context within which, they thought, it would be desirable to live. This was proclaimed in Puritan New England and it was elsewhere more subtle, but fundamental all the same. Given this intent, men saw general ideas, formative principles, as central to civic life. Often, I think, we fundamentally misunderstand their commitment to ideas, for we perceive it through the lens of direct action and see it as a commitment to orthodoxy, understanding the ideas as ends and interpreting the significant action as a rather sterile effort to cause mindless agreement with dead doctrine. But that was not what was happening, for the ideas were then recognized, not as ends, but as means, indirect means from the interworking of which profoundly significant developments would emerge.

In this effort, the major esoteric endeavor was at the integration of a heritage into a body of wisdom scaled to human capacity and usable in the living of life. The integration was dynamic: it was different from place to place and changed over time. But it was also continuous: judgments of value changed, but judgments of value were always made and the integration was not allowed to fragment. The major exoteric effort was to the persuasion of people, not to pay lip service to the integration, but to use it in giving form to their lives. Again, the ideas were seen as means; they were discussed as means; and men were exhorted to use them as means. Where indirect action was dominant, diverse discussions of theology, civility, political and legal theory, that now might be seen as fundamentally impractical, could then rightly be seen as central to civic life because of the indirect influence they would have on civic life.

This capacity for indirect action culminated in the framing of the American Constitution. The decision to redraw the Articles of Confederation shows the confidence that the leaders of the time had in indirect action, of which constitution writing is a supreme example. The Federalist Papers show well how the concern for the indirect consequences of governmental practices on people was central to the founders' thinking. Such concern is central to the entire theory of the separation of powers, to the great

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warnings against the dangers of faction, and to the mode of persuasion used on practically every controversial point. And in The Federalist Papers one sees the commitment to persuasion and to integration at its best. There were then few professional historians, but Publius could nevertheless draw on an historical synthesis far more potent than any now available, and because that synthesis was the common property of the educated, he could use it in detail, not as erudite ornamentation, but as a working tool of clear, compelling persuasion.

History moves slowly, even in our hasty age. Real shifts of concern take time, a succession of generations. They also take real, substantive labor, risks and dedication. As I see it, humane learning will meet its public responsibilities by shifting, on its esoteric side, away from preservation toward integration, and on its exoteric side, away from prophecy and toward persuasion. I fear that many will find this view to be presently as best a prophetic vision; I hope that before too long it will prove to have been a persuasive argument.

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