

Introduction

Diogenes

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What is meant by “the humanities” varies between academic cultures, but disciplines concerned with history, philosophy, or language are at the heart of the domain. History is the study of the human past, as are such disciplines as archaeology and the history of the different arts. Philosophy inquires about the fundamentals of human thinking – about our conceptualizing of reality and about the foundations or lack of foundations of truth and value. The linguistic disciplines study the structure and use of specific languages, but also the specifics of human language in general. Additional disciplines supervene on the history-philosophy-language fundament sketched here – ethnology, the study of folk culture, to name but one.

The humanities do not form a clearly circumscribed area but are certainly traditionally thought to represent a continent of its own in the world of learning. It has seemed to us to make sense to ask what the humanities are today – what are the significant occupations in humanistic research and why; what new developments there might be in the humanities; how people in these disciplines think about the *raison d’être* of their fields – and that is the rationale behind this issue.

A number of contributions in the issue offer broad overviews of the situation in whole academic disciplines. Thus there are personal but comprehensive presentations of the states of affairs and aspirations within history (Berger), archaeology (Yoffee and Fowles), linguistics (Traugott), literary studies (Zhang), and Arabic studies (Carter). An exposé of art history in Japan (Osano) could also be said to belong to this group.

The other cluster of articles, covering subjects seemingly quite remote from each other, can be said to look at the role of the humanities in another perspective than that of current academic research. The social dimension of the humanities is at the forefront in essays concerning the role of the humanities in the formation of a tenable relationship to the world (Djindjian; Kang) and the possible need for these disciplines to develop further by exploring more deeply such areas of research as premodern oral traditions (André) or digital language (Chung). The altered status of the humanities in society is also brought up as an issue in its own right (D’haen), as is the need to

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overcome their Eurocentric outlook (Samassékou). Furthermore, prevalent methods and arguments in the humanities and the social sciences are subverted to critical scrutiny (Elster).

Where the humanities are referred to collectively today, it is often in the context of crisis: these academic disciplines are seen as struggling with inadequate resources, and as not being the first priority of university presidents, departments of education, or research councils. That is a problem which we cannot redress here. Where intellectual quality is concerned, and social relevance, we do not think that the humanities have any reason to feel defensive. But reflection on the deeper role of the humanities, and the social and intellectual requirements on the humanities, may still need to be stimulated within the domain, and that is part of the reason for our wish to produce this issue. We believe that the overviews of several key humanistic disciplines, produced by distinguished scholars, will be of great interest both to those who work within these same disciplines and fellow humanists: the essays provide a vivid sense of the dynamism and import of the fields, and they should stimulate thinking about how their results and approaches could be transferred and appropriated in new contexts, within the humanities and in other areas. At the same time, fascinating underlying problems make themselves felt at many points in all essays: the tension between western scholarly ideals and Asian tradition; the need to combine original conceptualization and research with the making available of the perspectives that the humanities have to offer to a wider, lay audience, and many others.

The perspectives that the humanities open up are of little immediate economic consequence, as both humanistic researchers and political leaders know. However, a society as a whole could be compared to an individual. The importance of achieving an understanding of one's own history, and of having a personal grasp of the possibilities and difficulties of human understanding and the bases of knowledge and value, is not something to be dismissed lightly. Its exact weight is certainly a matter of personal priorities, but to many it would appear to be a necessary part of a full human life. Those kinds of understanding are very much the ultimate benefit that the humanities afford. They would be of little value, ideology instead of insight, if it they were not, in the final instance, built on the best empirical research and the best thinking that we are able to produce. To serious researchers, of course, the insight is its own reward and needs no further motivation.