

## THE ROLE OF HUMANITIES IN EDUCATION

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I have been asked to convey to you some thoughts on the role of the humanities in education. Of course, this covers a wide area and is, at the same time, the subject of numerous, lengthy debates – not only in the USA, but also at home in Germany. The humanities, it would seem, are gradually taking a back seat to make way for disciplines in mathematics and natural sciences, especially in this age of globalization, in this age of whirlwind technological advances. If we are to compare the sustainability of nations or of economic zones, the technological potential in business and science always ranks foremost. Whereas, in the past, it was often said that mineral resources in most cases created the wealth of a region or nation, today it is knowledge and, more specifically, first and foremost technological know-how. Correspondingly, efforts are being made on both sides of the Atlantic to promote, in the best possible way, the development of such knowledge, which is linked to what we call the sunrise industries, that is the information and telecommunications technologies, bio and nano technologies, genetic engineering, robotics, artificial intelligence, new materials and a lot more. In contrast, there is little or no talk of the cultural sciences, history or philosophy, of Oriental, African or Chinese studies, of languages or literature, or of religious studies when it comes to the future viability of a company.

And this is all happening despite the fact that all modern societies today are multicultural societies with considerable potential for opportunities and risks - despite the fact that East Asia has for some time now no longer been considered the Far East, but has been brought much closer to us by its products and investments – despite the fact that a bitter religious war is being fought on Europe's doorstep, its shadow also spreading noticeably and distressingly over the civilized world – despite the fact that we talk non-stop about having to tackle the causes for the stream of refugees from Africa at source – despite the fact that historical issues and debates repeatedly demand that we question our political identity. And then, when I think about my own country, there is hardly a current political debate – whether it is about the Euro crisis or how to deal with immigrants, or about the rights of minority groups, or issues such as genetic engineering and assisted dying, which is not overshadowed by our National Socialist past.

So you see: If we are to think about sustainability in a comprehensive sense, then we cannot bypass the humanities. But, where exactly do they stand in our education system? What do we have to do to actually allow the humanities to establish their place in the system? What can and must the humanities do to

achieve their purpose? Where are their boundaries and what should we not expect from the humanities? These are all questions to be examined in this debate.

In so doing, please excuse me for avoiding the difficult task of providing an exact definition of the term humanities! To go into this in detail would take us too far afield at this point. Broadly speaking, I understand it to encompass the subjects concerning human beings, our creation, behaviour, thinking and perception, actions, communication and interaction. In the process, I know that there is no clear-cut distinction between the social sciences, law, mathematics and, ultimately, also the natural sciences. However, I think that this definition is sufficient for our purposes today.

1.

In order to take a closer look at what the humanities can accomplish in our society, I would first like to address the question of what, in my opinion, they cannot accomplish, what we should not expect from them. For we are most certainly doing them a disservice if we ascribe to them a function which, due to their very nature or even due to the nature of human beings, would overburden them.

For example, the humanities cannot guarantee that human beings will no longer be drawn in the future to such barbaric catastrophic acts as those which took place in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A reason for these catastrophes is often seen to be in that specialists educated in natural sciences and technology or public officials with a legal background, allowed themselves to be exploited, for example, for Hitler's work of destruction – specialists without any training in the humanities. Ultimately, this consideration played a significant role in the debates on university reforms in the post-war period. In order to offer students of disciplines in technology and natural sciences a type of '*Studium Generale*' – a general education - and, in so doing, to raise their awareness of a social and humanistic responsibility, more and more humanities faculties were set up in technology- and science-oriented universities.

A few years ago, the US American philosopher from Chicago, Martha Nussbaum, also argued along these lines, when she raised the alarm to ring loud and clear with her assertion that cutting back on humanities programs in schools and universities posed a serious threat to democracy.

On no account is it my intention at this point to undervalue an education in the humanities. Indeed, I shall examine this more closely later on. However, I would like to say that scholars of the humanities too are subject to persuadability: persuadability through trends of the spirit of the times and fashion, persuadability through prescribed power structures and social pressures, persuadability through their own career aspirations and much more. Think of the

great philosopher Martin Heidegger, to name just one example, and his role in National Socialism.

However, I would definitely not go so far as Victor Klemperer, Romanist of Jewish descent, who was dismissed from his professorship in Dresden in 1935 in consequence of the citizenship law introduced in Nazi Germany and who wrote a year later in his diary: "If one day the situation were reversed and the fate of the vanquished lay in my hands, then I would let all the ordinary folk go and even some of the leaders, who might perhaps after all have had honourable intentions and not known what they were doing. But I would have all the intellectuals strung up, and the professors three feet higher than the rest; they would be left hanging from the lampposts for as long as was compatible with hygiene."

So it is not necessary to go so far as Klemperer to ascertain that humanists and the humanities were by no means always fearless champions of democracy, human rights and humanity. Totalitarian systems, such as National Socialism or even Communism, also invariably found compliant supporters in the world of the humanities, which, incidentally, was also the case with creative artists.

Without wishing to discredit an education in the humanities as such, we should therefore not pitch our expectations too high when examining the role of the humanities. We would place too great a responsibility on its role and, in the process, might ignore other factors which are equally important, indeed, perhaps more important for the preservation of a humane society.

2.

Now that I have explained what the humanities cannot do, I would like to turn to the question of what they should not do, or what, in my opinion, they should refrain from doing if they are to fulfil their responsibility for our democratic society. These amount to three things.

Firstly, they should, as I have just implied, not overestimate their capabilities. In the past, there have always been episodes in which intellectuals believed that it was possible to fundamentally improve the human race and the world. Just think of the ideal of the 'philosopher king', of whom great scholars from Plato to Leibniz or Voltaire expected a just and reasonable society. Or, take, for example, the ideology of Marxism, which continues to influence our daily life despite its obvious failure. Such approaches are always based on the belief that it is possible to free human beings from their inherent fallibility and their dark sides through structural changes or targeted teaching. It would be possible, so to say, to create a new human race, by only operating one or another lever of the political and social structure. Even if such promises of salvation are rarely heard these days, to my mind, this shows a certain potential for persuasion,

which could certainly develop into power and influence in certain political and social situations.

I see a second threat in the tendency to stray from the path of a strictly scientific nature. The fact that, from time to time, even renowned academics may succumb to this tendency is proven by an episode involving the famous Danish physicist Niels Bohr. As the story goes, he received a guest in his country house, who was amazed to see a horseshoe over the front door of his house. You know that the horseshoe is commonly known to bring good luck and protect against harm and evil spirits. In answer to the visitor's question as to whether he, Niels Bohr, actually believed in such a thing, the latter replied: "Of course not, but I understand it brings you luck whether you believe it or not."

For instance, what is today pushing its way into the realm of science under the catchword 'new age', often has more to do with esotericism than with actual science. An important door opener in this connection is, in my opinion, that postmodern philosophy which denies any objective human cognitive faculty, which discredits the achievements and methods of scientific research as mere social or cultural constructs, and, in so doing, is paving the way for both ideological caprice and pseudoscientific arbitrariness. Naturally, science – whether it concerns natural sciences or the humanities – cannot answer all of mankind's questions. There still remains a realm of faith. And, of course, perception and recognition also invariably have a subjective component. However, that does not exclude the fact that the methods applied in scientific research, such as those developed by academics from René Descartes to Karl Popper, are quite capable of accurately reflecting the reality around us, at least to a reasonable extent. It is and remains for me an imperative for credibility and integrity – also in the humanities – to strive for the highest possible degree of objectivity and comply with the parameters dictated by strictly scientific methodology.

Finally, my third argument concerns the relationship between the humanities and other scientific disciplines. Of course, Ms Nussbaum has a point when she highlights the significance of the humanities for the preservation of our democratic society. However, by the same token, we should not underestimate the significance of natural sciences, technologies and also the economy in this connection. We have learnt from the past how important a certain level of material welfare is for social peace and, consequently, also for the survival of our democracy. German history is a good illustration of this. For example, the Weimar Republic, the first attempt at democracy in Germany, found widespread acceptance amongst the general public in the short time between inflation and the world depression. It was the so-called Golden or Roaring Twenties, when people enjoyed reasonable economic prosperity. But then, this all came to an end with the world depression, which plunged millions of people into extreme poverty and the National Socialists sowed their seeds. Prosperity is, therefore, a

crucial factor in the capacity for and commitment to democracy. And, in this age of globalization and whirlwind technological advances, we now have no other choice: In order to also ensure the prosperity of future generations we must endeavour to be technological and economic leaders. I, personally, come from a small German federal state, which, for historical reasons, is encumbered with an immense mountain of debt and which, in order to gradually escape from the spiral of debt, is existentially dependent on a high level of economic value added. What choice do I have but to use every opportunity and exploit every potential available to achieve this? I believe that the humanities, too, must recognize this necessity and should not underestimate it.

3.

Having said that, it would be a big mistake, on the other hand, to undervalue the significance of the humanities. Let us take the individual as such to start with. There is no question in my mind that an education in the humanities enriches the life of each individual. To take just one example, anybody who has dipped into the philosophy of the Stoics, or anybody who has read Marc Aurel's self-reflections, learns many useful lessons for their own life. They realize that the fundamental issues of human existence have not changed through the millennia. Let me give you another example: Anybody who travels abroad, having acquired even just a basic knowledge of the language and culture of the country, finds it much easier to get by there. They discover that their efforts to speak the language of the country, for example in stores, cafés and restaurants, and the respect they show for the local customs and practices are rewarded with cordiality. They return home with different experiences to those who merely spend two weeks on the beach and find it hard to make themselves understood with English.

And the contention surrounding history! The former German Federal President Roman Herzog once said: "Anybody who, to some measure at least, takes stock of several thousand years of the history of mankind is, more than all others, safe from that fuzzy-headed agitation which befalls many a contemporary so easily and repeatedly. Historical knowledge is invariably the source of a serenity which should be the first requirement for truly rational political analysis and for rational political action." How right he is! For example, if an individual wishes to repossess their right to democratic participation, then they do not only need information on a specific subject. They need, and this is at least as important, to have the ability for clear judgment. And where should this come from, if they have not devoted time to history, in the fundamental issues concerning ethics, of the efficacy of social processes?

In addition, we have the whirlwind technological advances. A normal adult, who, twenty years ago, was, of course, way ahead of his children in all cultural techniques, has a completely different experience today: His own children at the age of eight or nine are already much more at home with the most important

communications and information media, the computer and the Internet, than the parent. How can we cope with the speed of this progress if, at the same time, we are not on firm ground in respect of a traditional constituent of absolute certainties?

That is why the recently deceased philosopher Odo Marquard attributed a compensatory role to the humanities, specifically to provide this traditional constituent. For example, only then, according to his theory, will a society be at all capable of successfully structuring its future. "The Future", according to Marquard, "needs the Past". And: "The humanities help traditions, so that people can endure modernization: they are (...) not hostile to modernization, but – as compensation for the damage caused by modernization – enable modernization." Even if it is most certainly not the exclusive role of the humanities, it is surely indisputable that the individual and society need such certainties all the more the faster our world becomes.

4.

But that's enough on the importance of an education in the humanities for our everyday lives. Let's now turn to politics, and allow me here again to take a brief look back in history. Two hundred years ago, because of Napoleon's successes, Germany had to suffer the shock of realising that it was fundamentally backwards. Backwards in terms of the economy, the military, politics, science and education. So people set about implementing broad-based reforms. These included the education reform in Prussia, conceived and implemented by Wilhelm von Humboldt. He was not simply concerned with laying the foundations for a technological and scientific awakening. Humboldt knew that underlying the lack of development in various fields there was major work to be done in one area. That is, the immature and even unpolitical individual still trapped in his own microcosm. Just like Kant's "man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity", Humboldt's ideal was an autonomous individual "who achieves self-determination and maturity through using his reason". With this in mind, his intention was to encourage individuals to be citizens of the world, stating: "To integrate the world as much as possible into one's own person is living, in the highest sense of the word. Inasmuch as possible, this should be achieved by full and active interaction with the world in order to develop as an individual. To become a citizen of the world means to deal with the big questions of humanity: to seek peace, justice, and care about the exchange of cultures, other gender relationships or another relationship to nature."

With this Humboldtian approach, education in the humanities goes far beyond mere acquired knowledge with respect to certain facts and also far beyond Marquard's compensating knowledge. Rather, education in the humanities provides orientation knowledge. It not only enables people to think about something but also to think critically about the future. To not only recall and

envision things that have been and that are, but also imagine what will be, what could be and what should be. Education in the humanities therefore not only teaches positive *knowledge*, but also practical knowledge, i.e. *ability*. It strengthens skills in dealing with positive knowledge. It thus hones people's judgement, critical abilities and creativity in dealing with the world as we encounter it, day in and day out. Education in the humanities is not simply a way of distinguishing oneself through the accumulation of lexical knowledge; rather it is an indispensable way of life for modern people in a modern democratic society.

5.

Given all this, the wish to attach a mercantilistic concept of performance to education in the humanities appears questionable. The question about the specific, direct use of humanities takes us away from their actual essence. Because they do not only affect that part of our reality that can be measured in numbers. Stanford University literary theorist Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht actually goes so far as to talk about the humanities in terms of "contemplation" or "consideration" rather than "research". And it is the case that the subject of the humanities is always the act of thinking itself, with the result that fantasy and imagination are ends in and of themselves, free from any justification or consideration about usefulness. According to German historian Elisabeth von Erdmann, the humanities "are a perception that has added colour, gloss, meaning, depth, darkness, perspective and much more to life, but no specific benefit that can be quantified in numbers."

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However, this does not mean that "anything goes" and anything that can be thought is valid in the humanities. Quite the opposite. Precisely because they deal with thought and the imagination but remain a science, the clear separation between truth and myth, between reality and fiction, between false doctrine and serious hypothesis is the very business of the humanities. They therefore perform the role of guardian in the diverse and sometimes also proliferating conceptual cosmos of a free society. But they are far removed from performing this function as a censor or a judge. Rather, they do this by presenting their findings on the open market of ideas and leave every individual free to take what they will. Depending on how important they feel this function is for them and depending on the intensity with which they pursue it, they can help to shape public opinion and influence the intellectual state of a society to a greater or lesser extent. Let's make this clear with an example: if serious historians at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had contradicted the many anti-Semitic images of Jews using serious research and relevant depictions that could be readily understood by a wide audience, they might have counteracted a fatal myth formation before it became too late after 1933.

This example touches on a problem which remains highly important today. I am talking about the many conspiracy theories that are continually propagated in

many different situations. We may like to dismiss them as the crazy ideas of individuals, as the inevitable phenomena of uneventful times in a society that is therefore hungry for sensation. That may even be the case. But we must not underestimate their danger, especially in the age of completely uncontrollable online communication. In times of crisis, conspiracy theories can develop enormous power in society with catastrophic consequences.

For this reason, it is very important to look more closely at some of these theories and to contradict them on the basis of facts. But although this is often done – for example, 9/11, the assassination of President Kennedy or the first moon landing – although most of the well-known conspiracy theories have so far been plausibly debunked, they stubbornly continue in the world and manifest astonishing persistence. It is obvious that we cannot counter this phenomenon at the factual level. For this reason, I feel that it is more important to tackle the level of the thought processes behind them. And this is where we come back to the humanities. It was no less a person than Karl Popper who provided us with an important key in the form of his method theory. According to Popper, a hypothesis can only claim to be valid if it is not only verifiable, but also falsifiable. And now take a close look at any random conspiracy theory: you will keep coming across statements that cannot be falsified because of their essence. Dark powers in the background are to blame; you can't disprove their existence because they act hidden in the dark. To put it another way: the masterminds in the background are so ingenious that they deliberately release information that indicates they do not exist, in order to mislead. You know all of this and laugh about the absurdity of such statements. But how often in history have the innocent been attacked because they were the victims of such conspiracy theories. Think of the witch hunts. Or think of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. Remember how often, even today, minorities act as scapegoats. All of these are the fatal consequences of conspiracy theories.

6.

And so, finally, we have reached the question of the specific use of the humanities. Regardless of the intrinsic value of humanities, there are obviously also socially and politically relevant benefits that, in my opinion, are indispensable. Even more so because technological progress is taking us into previously unknown frontier areas.

One such area is human genetics. For example, embryo-destructive research inevitably throws up the question of precisely when a human being begins to be human. If we assume that being human starts when the egg and sperm cells merge, then it is clear that all embryo-destructive research must be banned. However, if we assume that it happens at a later time, for example, at implantation, i.e. when the fertilised egg cell nests in the womb, the human being starts a few days later. In the days before this happens, embryo-destructive research would therefore be permissible. The first hypothesis is



predicated on the idea that the basic genetic configuration of the future individual is complete on fertilisation and thus the foundation has been laid for the whole person. The second hypothesis is predicated on the idea that it is only once the blastocyst is implanted in the mother's body and has entered into a biomolecular interaction and communication process with it that it controls the regular growth of the embryo. Basically, this is a sort of social tie that makes becoming a human possible in the first place. The basic question here, therefore, is a deeply ethical and philosophical one: can being human be sufficiently defined with the completion of its genetic configuration or is it also defined by this type of social tie? Every geneticist has to grapple with such basic philosophical questions in theory and practice if he or she wants to use his or her knowledge and abilities reasonably responsibly.

And what is true for the start of life is also the case for the end of life. The question of whether everything that is possible should actually be done is a deeply ethical question with which many of us will confront over our lives in view of medical progress. For example, life-prolonging measures for the terminally ill. Or think of the fiercely contested debate about active euthanasia. Here, it becomes clear that purely scientific aspects are not sufficient when we are defining and specifying what we understand by "being human".

Another area in which knowledge of the humanities is indispensable is the co-existence of the cultures on our planet. We have known how volatile and important this subject is for all of our futures since long before Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilisations". Globalisation long ago ensured that the most diverse cultures in our global village live together at very close quarters and communicate and interact with each other. We all know that this process is far from being only peaceful. The aspiration of the west to export its values of individual human rights and freedoms to other cultures encounters mixed reactions in those cultures. In the light of IS, Al Qaeda and Boko Haram we must not forget that in the Muslim world there are also countless young people who claim these rights for themselves. Think of the uprising in Iran against the status quo six years ago. Or think of the Arab Spring that began with so much hope four or five years ago. On the other hand, there are also tremendous counterforces, both religious and secular, that are fighting this desire for freedom with all their power and means. And although I firmly believe that we have to defend our values with the force of weapons in extreme cases, I am certain that the force of weapons cannot and must not be the be-all and end-all in this argument. It remains primarily an intellectual and philosophical question, but how can we tackle this question if we do not know the religious, cultural and philosophical foundations of the debate? How do we intend to conduct the intellectual debate if we are not clear about the origin and development of our own culture, if we do not know the genesis of the separation between the state and religion, if we only have a basic knowledge of the age of the Renaissance, Humanism, the Enlightenment, etc., if the religious, political, cultural, social and

economic importance of the Reformation is alien to us? Without research in the humanities, without spreading humanities knowledge across the breadth of our society, we will find it very difficult to conduct this debate.

But this debate is not only taking place on the large geopolitical scale. It is now also taking place within our societies. Today, because of the worldwide migration flows, very different cultures are living next door to each other in our *Länder*. My *Land*'s capital of Saarbrücken alone, which has a population of less than 200,000, is home to people from 150 countries. And with the current wave of refugees from countries suffering civil war, such as Syria and Eritrea, the density of co-existence will increase. There is a lot of talk about intercultural or transcultural dialogue. Only, how is this dialogue supposed to take place without sound intercultural knowledge? How is this co-existence supposed to be peaceful and productive if we do not tackle the cultural differences? How are we supposed to come together into a functioning community if we do not initiate and design appropriate cultural learning processes? How can that be done without examining similar experiences from history and using them to guide us? How are we supposed to avoid misunderstandings in the dialogue between these cultures if we do not have recourse to the expertise of ethnology or cultural studies? Cultural education is increasingly becoming an indispensable core skill in modern societies, without which a worthwhile and beneficial future can hardly be achieved.

These examples alone show us that the process of globalisation is not just an economic process, nor does it simply concern information and telecommunications technology. It is also a cultural process – especially when we ask ourselves: how can we shape this process on a human scale and create a win-win situation for all involved? And that – as I hope has become sufficiently clear from my words – is something that we will not achieve without a contribution from the humanities.