Educational research: the importance of the humanities

Richard Smith

ABSTRACT

It is one sign of the lack of understanding of the value of the humanities, to educational research and inquiry as to our world more widely, that such justifications of them as are offered frequently take a crudely instrumental form. The humanities (which I do not here distinguish from the arts) are welcomed insofar as they are beneficial to the economy, for example, or play a therapeutic role in people's physical or mental well-being. In higher education in the UK, at any rate, they are marginalised similarly, on the grounds that they neither appeal to the lucrative overseas student market nor constitute a significant source of grant income from research councils, industry or other funding sources. While their place in educational research is still defended in many quarters, the increasing demand that research should have 'impact' can leave the humanities appearing ineffectual. Furthermore the very idea of research is widely taken to mandate empiricist and 'scientific' approaches. While there are no easy solutions to this state of things, those of us who value the humanities in and for themselves might adopt two approaches in particular: to pursue vigilant criticism of the rampant instrumentalism and scientism of our time, and to emphasise the importance of that distinctive feature of humane enquiry, interpretation.

I Introduction

Some preliminary moves will set out what I understand by 'the humanities'. At the same time they will indicate some of the directions in which my argument will go. I take the humanities to include 'philosophy, political science, religious studies, history, anthropology, sociology,

literature, art, music, and studies of language and culture': the list is Martha Nussbaum's.[1] She is writing of what she describes as 'the parts of a liberal education that have by now become associated with "the humanities" and to some extent "the social sciences"'. The qualifications are helpful, both in indicating the dimensions of subject areas that are relevant (statistical analyses of voting patterns or suicide rates do not seem especially at home in the 'humanities') and in reminding us that there is a degree of fashion and even arbitrariness in what the humanities are taken to include. I would want to add to Nussbaum's list studies relating to film and other media; some areas of psychology such as recent critiques of the identification of the mind with the brain; psychoanalysis; human geography, whose specialists research *inter alia* well-being and health, including the experiences of users of the mental health services; and, by no means least, education as a field of enquiry in its philosophical, sociological and historical approaches.

It is common, in the UK at any rate, for the terms 'humanities' and 'arts' to be used interchangeably. The Arts and Humanities Research Council, for example, makes no attempt at a distinction.[2] It would make little difference to what I say here if I preferred the term 'arts'. However there is a growing tendency to use this word to indicate the performing and creative arts such as design, drama, film-making, dance and photography, not least because they have a readily understandable pay-off. In a recent newspaper article[3] the journalist Simon Jenkins defends the 'arts graduates' of these disciplines largely on the grounds that they are 'high achievers in finding work outside their skill group, probably through enhanced confidence and articulacy' (these are no doubt to be thought of as transferable 'employability' skills). He describes those who have studied the performing and creative arts as beneficiaries of a 'humanistic education', and regards the future as lying not 'in the brave new world of cyborgs and robots', but 'in what are rightly called the humanities', which he glosses as 'the history and imagination of human beings'. Despite Jenkins's nods towards an older conception of the arts it seems clear that his identification of them with the humanities is part of recasting both in what are taken to be more practical and useful terms, rather than as constituents of the liberal tradition that Nussbaum wants to restore.

[1] Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998) 11.

[2] Arts & Humanities Research Council: http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/About-Us/Pages/About-Us.aspx.

[3] Simon Jenkins, "Easy to sneer at arts graduates. But they will shape our world", *The Guardian* 2 Jan. 2015.

This example shows both something of what is at stake in thinking about the humanities, and why it is difficult to achieve any characterisation of them that would command wide acceptance. If they can embrace dance and photography, and areas of psychology and human geography, what can we say with confidence that they do not include? It might seem that we can draw a line between them and the sciences, but this requires caution. For instance, recent writers have interpreted Charles Darwin's ideas about evolution – essentially a scientific theory, it might be thought – as coloured by romanticism[4] and a deep interest in, and respect for, what might be thought of as the lowliest creatures, worms, sightless moles and flightless birds, a long way from the Darwin who is supposed to have championed the 'survival of the fittest'.[5] Darwin was keenly aware of the political and moral implications of his work, though in *The Origin of Species* he confined himself to the cautious understatement that 'Light will be thrown on the origin of man and his history'.[6] Scientists exploring the vastness of the universe (or universes, as some would now put it) are unsure whether it would be more extraordinary for us human beings to be alone here or for there somewhere to exist other creatures like us, with all the consequences of either interpretation, both practically and in terms of our self-image.[7] The 'brave new world of cyborgs and robots' that Simon Jenkins (above) sets up apparently as the technical end of science in order to contrast with his vision of the humanities, in fact holds profound consequences for our understanding of what it is to be human. This has been understood at least since Descartes' great thought-experiment which can here be re-worked as leading to the (erroneous) conclusion that I cannot be a robot if I am here wondering whether I am one: a thought-experiment that has been artistically dramatized in the film *Blade Runner*.

To these difficulties about the idea of the humanities we can add several more, most of them at least touched on by other contributors to this Issue. If what is distinctive about the humanities is that they are supposed to explore the human condition, then a plausible criticism is that 'being human' has tended to be conceptualised from particular perspectives,

[4] George Levine, *Darwin Loves You. Natural Selection and the Re-enchantment of the World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006.

[5] See Adam Phillips, *Darwin's Worms* (London: Faber, 1999).

[6] Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (London: Grant Richards, 1902), Ch. 14.

[7] See eg The Fermi Paradox, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/wait-but-why/the-fermi-paradox_b_5489415.html

primarily Eurocentric and masculine ones containing more than the seeds of colonialization and exploitation. This can easily be illustrated with respect to notions of personal identity and rationality as elements of being human, and to the relationship between humankind and the natural world. Yet the criticism is a positive rather than a dismissive one. It directs us not to imagine the humanities as revealing some timeless essence of what it is to be human – if anyone ever thought of them in this way – but rather as offering perspectives on or interpretations of the human condition. Such interpretations never claim to be final and authoritative: they are endlessly revisable as we encounter other people and learn of their experiences. I return to this point in the last section of the paper. To work and to write in the humanities is always to be part of a conversation joined by other voices who from time to time cause us to review our own standpoint in a new light. In particular, we are always learning of new and different ways in which people can be dehumanised, even if we are rightly reluctant to essentialise what it is to be human: ways in which, as Richard Rorty puts it,[8] we can be cruel to each other. This is one thing that the humanities teach us.

II Instrumentalising the humanities

Before turning to this point, however, and before discussing the place of the humanities in educational research and enquiry, I offer some illustrations of the wider fate of the arts and humanities in the UK, at the present time, which is that they are understood and justified in more or less crude instrumental terms. These examples show how they are rapidly becoming absorbed into what I have elsewhere[9] described as an 'epistemic monoculture' in which the diversity of value – of sport, remembrance and happiness as well as of the arts and humanities – is required to speak its truth in the language of means-end reasoning. The problem is not that the humanities are being thought of as good for something else, as if the only proper way to value them was 'for their own sake', a phrase whose opacity should bother us more than it does. The problem is that instrumentalism, while appearing innocently to observe that things which are good are generally good for something other than themselves, quickly moves to insisting on short-term and crude pay-offs: a move that

[8] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

[9] Richard Smith, An epistemic monoculture and the university of reasons, *in*: David Lewin, Alex Guilherme and Morgan White, eds., *New Perspectives in the Philosophy of Education: Ethics, Politics and Religion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 125-138.

precludes consideration of more complex benefits and those deeper values that the arts and humanities can help us understand.

To begin with three small and local examples: the English town of Belper in Derbyshire has revived its Arts festival. The local newspaper headlines this as 'Arts festival to boost economy', and reports that 'organisers are predicting it could give the town's traders a massive £110,000 boost'.[10] The announcement that Hull, in Yorkshire, was to be the 2017 City of Culture was reported as a '£184 million boost'[11]. The local paper highlighted the creation of jobs and established the relative status of culture and the economy by putting economic benefits at the start of its headline: '£60m UK City of Culture boost for Hull is "start of the future"'.[12] The website for the 2015 Welsh Eisteddfod includes a prominent link, 'Supporting the economy', where the reader is reassured that

> Independent research commissioned three times between 2000 and 2008 has shown a positive impact of £6-£8 million on the local economy, when the Eisteddfod visits the area… Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council commissioned their own economic impact research during the 2010 Eisteddfod, and results showed that the festival had a positive impact of over £7 million on the local economy, having a particular impact on shops and the food and drink sectors.

That the Eisteddfod is 'one of the world's greatest cultural festivals … [offering] an eclectic mix of music, literature, dance, theatre, visual arts and much more' only emerges as an answer to one of the FAQs.

These examples perhaps do no more than repeat elements of the bids that secured the successes they report, and in any case economic uplifts to deprived areas of the UK or anywhere else are not to be denigrated. Nevertheless, the distinctive goods represented by the arts can easily be forgotten when they are expressed in the same terms as the benefits to be obtained from the opening of a new car-plant or mega-store. More substantial examples are not difficult to find. A newspaper article by Peter Bazalgette, 'Use the arts to boost the

[10] *Belper News* 27 Jan. 2015.

[11] *Daily Mail* 20 Nov. 2013.

[12] *Hull Daily Mail* 21 Nov. 2013.

nation's health',[13] argues that the funding crisis in the UK's National Health Service can be solved by using the arts as a medical resource.

> In Cornwall, the Baring Foundation and Arts Council England are funding everything from theatre and textiles to dance or drama in care homes. The director of arts for Health Cornwall, Jayne Howard, says: 'Creative engagement for older people has been linked to greater mobility, greater social interaction, stronger appetite and a generally better quality of life'. … In Liverpool, local museums have developed House of Memories, an inspiring history project to help dementia sufferers capture and savour their past. …The Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust has partnered with the Birmingham Rep to create the Bedlam Festival of Ideas[14], involving those with mental health problems in drama and comedy.

These developments are called 'social prescribing'. In some parts of the UK doctors can prescribe drama, music or painting to their patients. 'University College, London has developed a three-year scheme actually called Museums on Prescription, which is being trialled in the south-east. It connects isolated, vulnerable older people to their local heritage; that is, to their own personal culture'. Naturally there is a similar scheme called Books on Prescription, through which 'books are recommended by doctors or other health professionals to support patients with particular conditions'.[15] Anyone surprised that health professionals are now equipped to understand just which conditions can be relieved by *Little House on the Prairie* but would be worsened by *Paradise Lost* is reassured by the hyperlinked website:[16] the books, which have such titles as *Overcoming Chronic Fatigue*, *Break Free from OCD* and *The Feeling Good Handbook*, are designed as part of – or instead of, it is not entirely clear – a cognitive behavioural programme. Similarly the benefits of Museums on Prescription seem to be getting out of the house and meeting people: real benefits, to be sure, particularly for

[13] Peter Bazalgette, "Use the arts to boost the nation's health", *The Observer*, 28 Dec. 2014. http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/dec/28/arts-boost-nations-health-nhs-funding-arts-council.

[14] Peter Bazalgette, "Use the arts to boost the nation's health".

[15] Peter Bazalgette, "Use the arts to boost the nation's health".

[16] http://www.booksonprescription.org.uk/

vulnerable people, but it is not obvious that museums, as opposed to other kinds of venues, are essential for this, still less that one museum would be better than another. When all museums are thought of indifferently as the same, something important about their place in the arts has been lost.

Bazalgette's article includes, we should not be surprised to find, some remarks in line with the prevailing orthodoxy about the importance of establishing 'what works' and 'rigorous evidence testing'. This does not stop him suggesting, on the basis of what appears to be no evidence at all, that 'projects already underway' have saved the National Health Service more than half a billion pounds. He finishes with the chilling observation that 'There's also much work to be done helping arts organisations and health authorities speak the same language': chilling, because it could only be an instrumentalised language of the arts.

Another substantial example: in 2014 Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum hosted an exhibition called 'Art is Therapy'. Here John Armstrong and Alain de Botton show 'what art can mean to visitors. And not so much from an (art-)historical point of view, but focusing rather on the therapeutic effect that art can have and the big questions in life that art can answer'.[17] They offer a commentary on 150 artworks in the museum, 'from the Middle Ages right through to the 20th century, including the Asia Pavilion'.[18] Armstrong and de Botton are experts in an extraordinary range of art, it appears: most art historians specialise in a limited period or school, such as the Renaissance or Cubism. But such scepticism would be misplaced: the purpose of the exhibition is 'to throw the emphasis not on where art came from or who made it, but what it can do for you – the ordinary visitor with the concerns that trouble us all'. Accordingly the usual wall labels, which often give little more than the name of the artist and the date of the painting, are variously replaced or upstaged by enormous yellow Post-it notes which, often being larger than the exhibits, seem to make the greater claim on the viewer's attention.

A piece of video on the web in which de Botton interprets the 'show' for the viewer gives a sense of the kind of therapeutic value de Botton sees in particular art works.[19] Rembrandt's

[17] John Armstrong and Alain de Botton, "Art is Therapy". https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/art-is-therapy.

[18] John Armstrong and Alain de Botton, "Art is Therapy".

[19] http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/video/2014/apr/25/alain-de-botton-art-is-therapy-rijksmuseum-amsterdam-video-guide

vast painting, *The Night Watch*, occupies one wall of a room that is usually full of visitors. De Botton tells us that we would like to be part of a crowd such as the painting depicts – a band of brothers, people with a common purpose – but not the crowd around us in the room where the painting is displayed. The Post-it tells us that 'this picture is about loneliness, for it tells us what we are missing when we are lonely'. It ends with the line 'I can't bear busy places – I wish this room were emptier'. An intricate wooden linen-cupboard reminds us that putting the linen in order 'belongs to the dignified aspects of life' and is not just some 'horrible, boring chore'. This, de Botton says, is its message to us. A painting of a tumultuous naval battle 'is frank about pride in achievement', according to its accompanying Post-it, and stands as a reproof to our tamer and less spirited world where we often lack 'the sheer courage and force of character' to see things through. The message is that 'Goodness should be strong'.

Here is a pastiche of what might be thought of as the traditional role of the arts in illuminating the lives of ordinary people struggling to understand the human condition. The problem is not simply the banality and shallowness of the commentary, which some reviewers of the exhibition have noted.[20] It is partly the way that de Botton knows everything there is to say about the painting or the cupboard in advance, as it were, before and without any real engagement with it, without the effort of interpretation. There is no effort. The exhibits do not hold before us more than we ever fully know: they merely confirm what on the most superficial level we know already. And it is partly that any picture of a crowd with a common purpose would presumably do as well as *The Night Watch*, any painting of a violent sea-battle would send us the same message as van Wieringen's.[21] The instrumentalism of art again has the effect that we barely need to look at particular paintings and art-objects at all: we read the message, nod in agreement and move on.

Instrumentalism has naturally made itself at home in the university too. One story, told by Marina Warner, novelist, historian and theorist of feminism and the fairy-story, can stand for many. In 2005 she was appointed to a Chair at the University of Essex, a university, founded in 1964, with a reputation for cosmopolitanism and for radical innovation in both the manner and breadth of its teaching. The Caribbean poet Derek Walcott accepted an invitation to

---

[20] Eg Adrian Searle in *The Guardian*, 25 April 2014.

[21] The full title of the painting is *The Explosion of the Spanish Flagship During the Battle of Gibraltar, 25 April 1607.*

become professor of poetry there in 2009. In 2012 Warner was asked to chair the Man Booker International Prize[2223] for 2015, and to give a series of seminars at All Souls College, Oxford. These accolades were well received and supported from 'on high', as Warner puts it, at Essex. However this was while research was regarded as of major importance at this and almost every UK university. Things quickly changed when a new Vice-Chancellor arrived and made it known that he was less impressed by high research ratings than the fact that in future they will be less well funded. Warner writes that 'Suddenly, the watchword from management was "Teaching, Teaching, Teaching"'. Her agreement that she would divide her time 70 per cent for research and 30 per cent for teaching was rescinded. If she wanted to honour her commitments to the Man Booker and All Souls College she would have to take a year's unpaid leave. A proposed new human rights building on the campus became a big new business school instead. Derek Walcott's visiting professorship was terminated, at the personal insistence of the Vice-chancellor and against the express wishes of everybody else. Warner writes:

> Outside grants are becoming the only way to earn time off to write or to take on a piece of research. The model for higher education mimics supermarkets' competition on the high street; the need for external funding pits one institution against another – and even one colleague against another, and young scholars waste their best energies writing grant proposals… I could go on, about the cases of colleagues and their experience of managers' 'instructions', arrogance and ignorance, and the devices they adopt to impose their will … What is happening at Essex reflects … the general distortions required to turn a university into a for-profit business – one advantageous to administrators and punitive to teachers and scholars.

This, the government's business model for higher education, she writes, is wholly incompatible with the university's traditional mission which, as she puts it, is to

> inspire the citizenry, open their eyes and ears, achieve international standing, fill the intellectual granary of the country and replenish it, attract students from this country

[22] Marina Warner, "Why I quit", *London Review of Books* 11 Sept. 2014. That her experience is now widespread is confirmed by many of the comments on the online version of her article: http://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n17/marina-warner/diary

[23] A biennial international literary award made to a living author of any nationality for a body of work published in English or generally available in English translation.

> and beyond, keep up the reputation of the universities, expect your educators and scholars to be public citizens and serve on all kinds of bodies…

Marina Warner's apocalyptic vision and language are now echoed by many. For instance, the distinguished literary theorist and cultural critic Terry Eagleton wrote at the beginning of 2015 that 'we're living through an absolutely historic moment – namely the effective end of universities as centres of humane critique, an almost complete capitulation to the philistine and sometimes barbaric values of neo-capitalism'.[24] Marina Warner herself, writing again in 2015,[25] and now the holder of a Chair at Birkbeck College, University of London, and winner of the 2015 Holberg prize following her departure from the University of Essex,[26] remarked bleakly that 'Faith in the value of a humanist education is beginning to look like an antique romance'. An Easter editorial in *The Guardian*[27] referred to the UK Conservative-led Coalition government's 'assaults on the teaching of humanities' alongside its assaults on social security and migrants as being all 'underpinned by a belief that the essential metric of human worth is their utility … [where] it is the marketplace that provides the only final judgement'. When the 'extraordinary idea that people have worth in themselves' (ibid.) comes to seem quaint, the idea of the humanities as having anything other than extrinsic value, in boosting tourism or helping people to overcome chronic fatigue, naturally suffers the same fate.

IV Educational research

Given most of what I have written in this paper so far there might seem little reason to expect educational research and enquiry to take much interest in the topics and areas with which the humanities have traditionally concerned themselves, or to draw on the literature of the humanities and the ideas and insights that they explore, or to use their characteristic approaches and disciplines: philosophy, history or theology, for example. In fact although

[24] Interview with Terry Eagleton, *Times Higher Education*, 8 Jan. 2015, 43.

[25] Marina Warner, "Learning my Lesson", *London Review of Books*, 19 March 2015.

[26] An international award, sometimes called 'the Nobel Prize of the Arts', worth roughly £400k.

[27] 3 April, 38.

there are, as we shall see, many pressures driving educational research (as it will then be called) towards empiricism, the scientific and the faux-scientific, a very broad view of it, which might equally be called educational enquiry as educational research, is built into its institutionalisation in the UK.[28] This is effected chiefly by the formal, regular evaluation of academic research, which in the UK has taken place over some 30 years under the aegis of several Research Assessment Exercises (RAEs) and most recently operated under what was called the 'Research Excellence Framework' (REF).[29] Some account of its main features, bringing out their friendliness to the humanities, will be helpful for readers outside the UK; it appears to be necessary for many UK readers too, a point that I shall return to below.

First, at the very least the existence of the REF and its predecessors registers the importance of research for the whole university sector in the UK, including its Humanities departments, since virtually every university enters most of its academic departments for evaluation. It thus stands in the way of a formal division, which some politicians – and, naturally, some academics[30] – favour, between those universities that do research and those that don't, although the channelling of research funding to the REF 'winners' is beginning to result in a *de facto* degree of stratification. Accordingly, at least in theory, the humanities are seen as having a research base no less than the sciences and social sciences. Without this their continuing existence in the university would be seriously at risk, not least because all teaching is now supposed to be 'research-led'.[31]

Secondly, 65 per cent of REF rankings was determined on the basis of publications. (Unfortunately these are designated as 'outputs', in the 'barbaric' and 'corrupting' language of 'control, closure and somewhat crudely crafted measurement'.[32]) In Education those

[28] Much of what I say here applies across a wide range of academic research and not just to educational research. There is no space here to explore this point in detail.

[29] The results of the REF were published in December 2015. The next iteration of the exercise is due to finish in 2020. Similar exercises are now to be found in many other countries.

[30] See eg "Top universities should get funding to stop 'mediocrity', says Russell Group head", *The Daily Telegraph* 23 Oct. 2009.

[31] This is widely agreed, partly because it makes it more difficult for government to divide universities into those that teach and those that research, though there is less agreement on quite what the phrase means.

[32] Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, quoted in *Times Higher Education*, 29 Jan. 2015. http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/rowan-williams-on-higher-educations-inhuman-and-divisive-jargon/2018188.article.

publications could include work from any of the disciplines and they could appear as books, chapters in books or online-only material as well as conventional academic journal articles. Their subject-matter was restricted only by having to be about education in some way. A journal article could be about happiness and well-being. A book could be about beauty; it might be a biography of a nineteenth-century social and educational reformer. There was nothing to prevent an open-access, online-only journal article on the educational implications of the thinking of Hannah Arendt or Slavoj Žižek from being highly rated. As a member of the Research sub-Panel for Education I estimate such publications amounted to around 40% of what was submitted. Naturally there were also empirical studies using large data-sets, reports of randomised controlled trials, and all kinds of work that had a statistical, social science or experimental basis.

Thirdly, evaluation of publications was carried out by a panel of academic peers exercising their judgement: judgement on the quality of the work submitted. There were no proxies for judgement, such as citation counting or the rankings of journals, at any rate for work in Education.[33] Evaluators employed three criteria: originality, rigour and significance. 'Rigour' was glossed as 'fitness for purpose', it included 'the integrity, coherence and consistency of arguments and analysis',[34] and any expectation that it indicated an expectation of 'scientific' methodologies was explicitly repudiated. 'Significance' was understood 'in terms of the intellectual agenda of the field': thus a journal article that addressed a debate now regarded as of little interest, and that did not make a case for its continuing relevance, would have been evaluated as of weak significance.

The point I am concerned to emphasise here is that there was nothing in the way Education research was evaluated that would be surprising or unfamiliar to academics specialising in History, Philosophy, Theology, Modern Languages or English Literature. There was reassurance too for researchers with a humanistic approach to education in the report on the Research Excellence Framework published once the outcomes were known.[35] On work submitted in Philosophy of Education, 'the quality of philosophical outputs was generally

---

[33] Economics and Econometrics for example received citation data 'where available' and made use of it 'where considered appropriate'. HEFCE, Panel criteria and working methods, January 2012 (Bristol: HEFCE).

[34] HEFCE, Panel criteria and working methods, 67.

very high. World-leading conceptual work addressed and illuminated complex educational issues and contributed to the refinement of theoretical understanding'.[36] There was 'some excellent research in the history of education'.[37] 'Theoretical work in sociology and social theory was judged to be very strong, and often innovative'.[38]

This, if sufficiently widely understood, is a powerful source of support for educational research that is rooted in the humanities. However there is at least one aspect of the REF that points in a different direction. The 2014 REF gave for the first time a 25% weighting to 'Impact': every academic subject department was required to include in its submission some case-studies (roughly one for every 10 active researchers) demonstrating how its research benefits the wider, and specifically non-academic, community. There are, first, obvious difficulties in proving such benefits, especially for a humanities department, of Philosophy or English Literature, say, though Pure Mathematics will have the same problem, in attempting to show the 'impact' of its work, and of course its economic impact in particular, beyond the world of education. The implicit model seems to be that of working with an industrial partner to invent a light-sabre, or to discover and exploit a new lubricant for artificial hip joints.

A second problem is that the idea of impact, despite its relatively minor standing in the REF – 25% as opposed to 65% for publications (or 'outputs') – has rapidly colonised the academic imagination. Perhaps academics always secretly longed to be big players in 'the real world'; perhaps economic impact that can be set out on a spread-sheet is the only thing likely to impress the new kinds of managers and administrators that Marina Warner encountered, and researchers in search of promotion and favour know who it will pay them to side with. At any rate academics from many disciplines, but from Education especially, are now confusing – whether through deliberate misconstrual, fantasy or honest misunderstanding – the highly specific, and limited, Impact dimension of the REF with the very different criteria for publications. (To repeat: these were originality, rigour and significance: 'significance' did not mean 'impact' in the sense that the REF used the term.) It has quickly become common to hear people asserting that 'it's all about impact now', or priding themselves on the usefulness

[36] HEFCE, Panel criteria and working methods, 108.

[37] HEFCE, Panel criteria and working methods, 108.

[38] HEFCE, Panel criteria and working methods, 108.

of their research by contrast with people who write journal articles or books – which, as we have seen, are merely 'outputs' in any case.

A third problem is that academics are naturally being encouraged to prioritise research that will have impact,[39] as opposed to what is sometimes called 'blue skies' or 'curiosity-driven' research whose only criterion is academic merit. Furthermore, they should prioritise their impact from the outset rather than trying to create it after the work's completion: a remarkable idea which seems to rule out the possibility of open-mindedness on the part of the researcher from the start.[40] This resembles what is sometimes called 'sponsorism': grants from outside the university become the only way to buy time to do research. Academics thus increasingly design their research programmes in the light of what they have reason to think outside bodies – charities, research councils, industry – will fund, rather than, as they once did, identifying an interesting field of enquiry and then looking for sources of funding where appropriate.

In this way the REF is widely if wrongly interpreted as in alliance with the other factors driving educational research towards the empiricism and scientism – that is, excessive respect for the image and tropes of science – that render more humane approaches and paradigms ever more marginal. Funding agencies external to the university typically support research that involves extensive collection and analysis of data, rather than research that involves thinking and writing (however is a specific sum of money to be allocated to anything so vague?), with the result that empirical and data-driven projects become prioritised over ones based in the humanities. The pressure to take on high fee-paying overseas students has similar effects.[41] Since their grasp of English would need to be exceptionally strong if they are to grapple with conceptual distinctions and subtleties or philosophical ideas, it generally seems safer to steer them towards approaches that foreground the accumulation and analysis of data: to T-test, ANOVA, ANCOVA, Chi-square, Linear regression, Factor analysis, Rasch

[39] Here and below I distinguish 'Impact', as a technical aspect of the REF, from the more general sense of making a difference, where I substitute lower case and write of 'impact'. The tendency to confuse them is causing many problems, as I note.

[40] Laurie Taylor satirises this: 'Lies, damned lies and impact', *Times Higher Education*, 18 June 2015, p. 60.

[41] Marina Warner, "Learning my lesson", quotes 'a professor who resigned from a Russell Group university': 'The incessant emphasis was on cash … accept anyone for study who could pay, unethical as that was especially at postgraduate level, where foreign applicants with very poor English were being invited to spend large sums on degrees'.

models and so on, which can be handled in the universal language of mathematics and statistics. Then there need to be courses and modules teaching these techniques, with the result that they become institutionalised as the standard ways of doing educational research.[42]

V The interpretive turn

It will be clear from the previous section that the direction in which educational research, as much other academic research, is travelling in the UK is similar to the path that is taking the humanities to being understood in largely instrumental ways. In both areas we find the reduction of the idea of worthwhileness to what can be expressed in monetary terms, we find judgement in danger of being replaced by metrics, and we find researchers, writers and other artists being expected to talk up the value of their work to the taxpayer, and to become its energetic and unhesitating salespersons, to the point where this becomes the principal consideration. Both the humanities and academic research thus become characterised by a kind of knowing in advance, a self-assured preparedness to advertise the results and value of the work still to be created or the research yet to be done: just as de Botton had no hesitation in telling the museum visitor what the meaning of a painting was before she had had time to engage with it, academics are expected to plan the impact of their research before they have embarked on it. This knowingness, as I have elsewhere described it,[43] is antithetical to the humanities: to the distinctive ways in which they are both brought into being and understood.

The issue of how artists bring their works into being is beyond the scope of this paper. I shall accordingly focus on the second issue. What is central to our understanding of the humanities is interpretation. It is usual in this context to distinguish between *Erklären* and *Verstehen*, between explanation or scientific knowledge on the one hand and ordinary, everyday, interpretive understanding on the other.[44] In the case of *Erklären* we try to shed light (this is the etymology of the German word) on what is obscure. Typically we look for the cause of a phenomenon. We want to know if the car will not start because it's out of fuel, the battery is

[42] See further Paul Smeyers and Richard Smith, *Understanding Education and Educational Research* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) 4-5.

[43] Richard Smith, "A strange condition of things: alterity and knowingness in Dickens' 'David Copperfield'", *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 2013, 371-382.

[44] Georg Henrik von Wright, *Explanation and Understanding* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 19710.

low or some wiring connections have come loose, or for some other reason. The doctor tries to discover whether the patient's stomach pains are caused by ulcers, gall stones, gluten intolerance or any one of a number of other factors. When the car mechanic or the doctor has found the explanation they can proceed appropriately to put things right, and that (with luck) will be the end of the matter. What we might think of as the brisk, no-nonsense search for explanations has been characteristic of the western mind-set for many centuries, its power and prestige steadily growing since what we call the Era of Scientific Revolutions that began roughly around the start of the seventeenth century, and it is responsible for much that makes our lives safer and more comfortable than those of our ancestors.

Some caution is necessary here: clearly specialists in the humanities are often interested in causal explanations, as when historians discuss the origins of the First World War, even if this involves a more complex notion of causation than a car failing to start. Musicians investigate the sources of jazz. Shakespeare's influence on Keats, and Keats's on Wilfred Owen, seem to involve a kind of causation. Sociologists are interested in inequality as a cause of alienation and civil unrest. Nor is there always a sharp distinction between causes and reasons. Reasons can sometimes be causes, as Davidson has argued: this a point of major interest in the theory of psychoanalysis, which there is no space to discuss here.[45] At the same time science, which we might be tempted to think of as committed exclusively to *Erklärung,* is often strongly interpretive as well as holding important implications for how we are to think of being human. Charles Darwin provides an example of both: much of his work consisted of reinterpretation of facts about the natural world that were already known, and it has indeed held rich implications for 'man and his history', in Darwin's words, as I noted above.

The central features of interpretation can be seen if we consider the careful interpretation of a text: the attempt to make sense of, and reach a thoughtful and measured evaluation of, a particular novel, play or poem, a work of philosophy or theology– in short a humanities text, understanding 'text' in a broad sense to include music, dance and art objects such as sculpture; a broad sense justified by the way what is at issue is how we 'read' what is before us, just as we can talk of 'reading' other people. While there is no sense that we expect to reach a conclusive 'reading' or understanding of a poem by Seamus Heaney or a painting by Frida Kahlo, after which we can move on to Wendy Cope and Chris Ofili, there are

[45] Donald Davidson, "Actions, Reasons, and Causes", *The Journal of Philosophy* 60. 23, 1963, 685-700.

nevertheless features that are characteristic of good interpretation, and features that are characteristic of bad. We expect readers (or 'readers') to attend to the full text and not just those features of it that support their preferred interpretation, and to seek out and take account of other interpretations that have been offered in the past and are being made in the present. An interpretation that is quick, superficial and impressionistic tends to be less impressive than one that is rich, subtle and reflective, and to explicate the meaning of such terms does not imply subjectivism but emphasises the aspects of interpretation which are common to most experienced readers. We do not value a particular interpretation because it supplies the last word: it may by contrast give rise to new debate and new ideas about the text, stimulating further readings and further thought. The good interpretation is one that we can engage with, argue with and develop in turn. Adam Phillips writes of psychoanalysis, that most interpretive of human relationships, that it is a matter of 'translating' a person 'while suspending our belief in an original'.[46] That is to say that there is no more one 'real' person to be recovered and known than there is a single, univocal meaning of a poem to be established. The point of psychoanalysis is 'to free people to translate and be translated, rather than to acquire a definitive, convincing version of themselves'.[47] Scientific interpretation, by contrast, is generally part of the process of reaching an answer on which the whole scientific community will agree, even if that answer is modestly expressed as 'the best one we have so far'.

If the humanities teach us much about other people and about ourselves, this is no doubt partly because their subject matter is the common experience of being human. But it is not just what we come to understand through them that is important, but how we come to understand it. It is *Verstehen* that we draw on in our engagement with the humanities, and also in our ordinary encounters with other people.[48] Understanding another person's behaviour (or, indeed, one's own) is not like shedding light on something which, while obscure and elusive, is indubitably there to be discovered, identified and explained. In any relationship we may wonder from time to time if we have given offence, if the other person is over-reacting to something trivial, if they have displaced some other anxiety or source of stress onto something we have said or done. We offer our interpretation, if we are wise,

[46] Adam Phillips, *Promises, Promises: Essays on Literature and Psychoanalysis* (London: Faber, 2000) 147.

[47] Adam Phillips, *Promises, Promises*, 147.

[48] Also in our encounters with at least some non-human animals.

tentatively and with caution – 'It seems to me that something is worrying you this evening' – in awareness of the possibility that this overture may be hurled back at us – 'Oh, you've finally noticed, have you?' – and in awareness too that the response may be justified. We suggest that things at work may be getting our friend or partner down: their agreement, if they agree, may seem to end the need for further interpretation and direct the conversation to questions of long hours, unsympathetic managers and failed bids for promotion. On the other hand our partner's agreement may strike us as too ready: perhaps there is some other reason, something that he or she does not want to talk about. Then there is the delicate matter of trying to discover whether they would welcome the offer of support in approaching a subject that they are finding difficult to talk about, or experience it as a crass intrusion.

If I am engaging with somebody in this way their problems do not leave me untouched, not least because it may well be less the presenting problem itself that is causing difficulties than my own failure to respond to it sensitively. Perhaps I see it too much through the lens of my own preoccupations. Thus I need to be attentive to myself as well as to the other person, while not allowing myself to become the focus of my interest. Interpretation is never finalised: even if the two parties concerned are satisfied by the end of the evening or the week that they have made sense of things it is entirely possible that the whole matter will look different and need to be opened up again later. Perhaps the other person begins to feel that I have manipulated them into a particular way of viewing things; perhaps I begin to resent the extent to which his or her concerns have pushed my own ones aside. So it goes on, and the fact that interpretation here never reaches a definite conclusion, a final truth so to speak, is not a weakness by contrast with the greater propensity of scientific explanation to settle a problem and move on. Interpretation can make progress, as my example above shows, even if sometimes it doubles back on itself and asks if progress has really been made.

In this way the humanities, as both sites and reminders of our capacity for interpretation, stand for the possibility of endless reinvention, the chance to see ourselves as the mischievous children of comic strips, independent adventurers, romantic heroines, battlers against oppression of various kinds, lost souls in search of identity, people up against the final problems of how to live with old age and impending death. Always they call our powers

of interpretation into play to remind us that there is seldom just one real world out there, but a variety of perspectives on whatever confronts us. Fay Weldon makes the point memorably:[49]

> It's always wonderful to find out that there is a view of the world, not just the world: a pattern to experience, not just experience – and whether you agree with the view offered, or like the pattern, is neither here nor there. Views are possible, patterns discernible – it is exciting and enriching to know it.

Of course not everyone finds it wonderful that there are views of the world, and not just the world. Fundamentalists, not excluding the fundamentalists of neoliberalism and scientism, insist that theirs is the one true view. Their canonical texts are to be taken literally: interpretation is anathema. It is one of the great merits of the humanities that they have the power to unsettle this insistence; and it is tempting to wonder if this is one reason why they find themselves pushed to the margins of a world increasingly dominated by fundamentalists of every kind.

[49] Fay Weldon, *Letters to Alice, on first reading Jane Austen* (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1984), 74.