
Response to Presidential Address

HUMANE LETTERS: NOTES ON THE CONCEPT OF
INTEGRITY AND THE MEANINGS OF HUMANISM

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At the heart of Angela Hurley's fine Presidential Address is the virtue of integrity.¹ I am not referring to the quality of conscience that goes by this name, the one that might, for example, stop someone from targeting working class, minority home-owners with no-check, sub-prime mortgages. Needless to say, this is a crucial virtue and one in short supply. What I have in mind, though, is the more general idea of wholeness.² Integrity, in this more general sense, is clearly central to Hurley's address. She calls on us to act in our work on a humanitarian impulse, and she explains that this means working for more humane schools. It is not only how schools treat children that concerns Hurley but whether they educate students to be humane, and to lead fully human, integral lives. Central to Hurley's essay, then, is her evocation of our fragmented, compartmentalized, divided, modern existence. She points to rifts in the modern psyche—such as those between thinking and feeling or between facts and ideals—and alienation in contemporary society. It is these social and psychic separations, she suggests, that lead to the violence, the superficiality, and mindless consumerism of contemporary existence:

Life simply does not work on this fragmented model: human beings are unique totalities, not a mixture of isolated categories. Such a divided model encourages individuals to live “on the surface” of things, not acknowledging the depths of their existences.³

Hurley calls on us, then, to heal these rifts and to educate for wholeness. And you will notice that she strives to issue this call in a manner that itself is integral. The voice conveys both thought and feeling. The address is ecumenical: the reader is not assumed to be a member of a certain camp or discipline.⁴ But this raises a very interesting methodological problem: How can a scholar address the problem of fragmentation when the very idea of scholarship is inseparable from epistemological hyper-specialization? Given that this specialization has helped shape and justify the fragmentation of modern life, isn't a scholarly brief on behalf of wholeness a contradiction in terms?

If anyone still doubts that there is a problem with such specialization and with the modern research university, consider just one current feature of

the contemporary academy. It is now a commonplace of faculty meetings and other forums to praise a scholar for the amount of funding they have secured, for the number of articles they have published, and so on. But of course it makes all the difference in the world whether this funding funded something worthwhile, whether these articles were any good. How many average published articles, if you will, together equal the worth of, say, Chomsky's review of B.F. Skinner's *Verbal Behavior*?⁵ If we are going to have a quantitative system, then shouldn't the publication of things that are deeply muddled or misleading, fuzzy or fussy, predictable or sentimental, count negatively? In any case, that we now speak in quantities of scholarship suggests that we have lost the ability or lack the time or interest to make qualitative discriminations.

The irony is that the "publish or perish" motto has produced an incredible number of books and articles critiquing the research university.⁶ I will mention only three that stand out for the way they tackle head-on the problem of scholarly specialization: Bruce Wilshire's fascinating, if slightly overreaching, *The Moral Collapse of the University* (1990); David Damrosch's more measured, if slightly underwhelming, *We Scholars: Changing the Culture of the University* (1995); and an important precursor for both of these works, a book that deserves a wider audience, Owen Barfield's dialogue *Worlds Apart* (1963).⁷

Of course, all of these texts are relatively recent if we recall just how long the splintering of knowledge has been going on. For example, John Stuart Mill was already complaining about it in his St. Andrews Address in 1867:

For if the inexorable conditions of human life make it useless for one man to know more than one thing, what is to become of the human intellect as facts accumulate? In every generation, and now more rapidly than ever, the things which it is necessary that somebody should know are more and more multiplied.... Every science and art must be cut up into subdivisions.... Now, if, in order to know that little completely, it is necessary to remain wholly ignorant of the rest, what will be the worth of a man, for any human purpose except his infinitesimal fraction of human wants and requirements? His state will be even worse than simple ignorance. Experience shows that there is no one study or pursuit, which, practiced to the exclusion of all others, does not narrow and pervert the mind; breeding in it a class of prejudices special to that pursuit, besides a general prejudice...against large views from an incapacity to take in and appreciate the grounds of them.⁸

And of course here we are also on the turf of the early Nietzsche, the Nietzsche who had left the university and philology and was wondering what he had (almost) become, the Nietzsche of "We Scholars" and "Schopenhauer as Educator" (1874).⁹ His was not the first word on the topic but was already pretty much the last word on it.

The scholar, by which he means the denizen of the modern university, Nietzsche says, is a vivisectionist, a mole, a "laboriously crawling eye." He elaborates on the scholar's curious way of looking at things in a memorable passage, in which he notes that the scholar displays

keenness of sight for near objects, combined with great myopia for the remote and the universal. The scholar's visual field is usually very restricted, and his eyes must be kept closely focused on the object. If he wants to move from a point under investigation to another point, he must shift his whole visual apparatus to that point. He divides the picture into sections, like a man focusing his opera glasses on the stage and seeing now a head, now a piece of clothing, but never anything whole.¹⁰

And this way of carving things up is not limited, in its practice or its effects, to mere academic matters. Allow me to quote a fictional character on this point since what he points to is all too real. This is Andre from Andre Gregory's and Wallace Shawn's *My Dinner with Andre*:

ANDRE: Yeah. You know, it's like what happened just before my mother died. You know, we'd gone to the hospital to see my mother, and I went in to see her. And I saw this woman who looked as bad as any survivor of Auschwitz or Dachau. And I was out in the hall, sort of comforting my father, when a doctor who is a specialist in a problem that she had with her arm, went into her room and came out just beaming. And he said: "Boy! Don't we have a lot of reason to feel great! Isn't it wonderful how she's coming along!" Now, all he saw was the arm, that's all he saw. Now, here's another person who's existing in a dream. Who on top of that is a kind of butcher, who's committing a kind of familial murder, because when he comes out of that room he psychically kills us by taking us into a dream world, where we become confused and frightened. Because the moment before we saw somebody who already looked dead and now here comes a specialist who tells us they're in wonderful shape! I mean, you know, they were literally driving my father crazy. I mean, you know, here's an eighty-two-year-old man who's very emotional, and, you know, if you go in one moment, and

you see the person's dying, and you don't want them to die, and then a doctor comes out five minutes later and tells you they're in wonderful shape! I mean, you know, you can go crazy!¹¹

What we are dealing with then is an old problem, one only growing worse, and one that stretches from the university where it is formalized and authorized to everyday life where fragmentation is experienced as anything but an academic matter. Hurley, then, has confronted a dilemma central to our work. I suspect we all have all felt this tension. Give us a certain kind of problem, with a limited scope, and we become fairly fluent. But when it comes to the most important questions, we struggle to find words. What we come up with sounds sophomoric to the scholar in us. Our scholarly articulateness and authority can seem to exist in an inverse proportion to the reality and importance of the issue we are discussing. Given this tension, we should admire Hurley's address for taking this risk of trying to speak straight to the heart of the matter as she sees it, without undue fuss or forensics.

At the same time, the holistic writers on which Hurley draws can sometimes settle for overly fuzzy accounts of wholeness. It is as if all distinctions led to the sort of pernicious divisions we have been considering. But of course this cannot be so. For one thing, these writers themselves want to make a distinction between integral and non-integral ways of leading a life, and many others besides. We need to make a distinction, then, between distinguishing and compartmentalizing. Certainly, distinctions—especially those that are taken for granted, those that seep into the very fabric of things—can get in our way of seeing connections. But distinctions can also help us see more too. When we learn a new distinction, it can double the world we inhabit.

For example, I took an architecture course in college that had a profound effect on me. The professor developed richly and freshly a score of distinctions, between form and function, frame and cladding, pedestrian scale and car scale, vernacular and modernist, horizontality and verticality, between buildings that blend in and those that stand out, and so on. Now I could be wrong, but this professor seems very unlike the arm surgeon described by the fictional Andre. Thanks to that class, the world I inhabit now is, among other things, an architectural world. It is hard for me even to imagine what it was like to walk down a street before that class. I suppose it was like some parts of dreams where certain things are simply left blank, undefined.

What I am calling for, as paradoxical as it sounds, is an analysis of integrity. However, it is my contention that attempting to describe wholeness precisely and incisively is not necessarily a contradiction in terms. So let's make some distinctions about integrity. Right away I want to make two moves, one inspired by Plato, and one by Aristotle. The Platonic move is to suggest an isomorphism between psyche and polis, the constitution of the self and of

society. As you recall in the *Republic* (Jonathan Lear points out that the title, *Politeia*, would have been better translated as *Constitutionality*),¹² Plato has Socrates say that the interlocutors should shift from psyche to polis, since justice there will be writ larger and thus more easy to see. I would like to reverse this procedure and say that it will be easier to focus more sharply on integrity in the self than in human culture and history. When it comes to holism, a downshift in scale helps us sharpen our vision. Rather than trying to grasp how everyone and everything is interconnected as some holistic writers do, let us try to see what it means for an individual to achieve integrity.

The Aristotelian move is to recall and modify somewhat the doctrine of the mean. For Aristotle, every virtue can be located between two vices. Courage is flanked by cowardice on the one side and foolhardiness on the other. Typically, this is understood to mean that one should neither go too far in one direction nor in the other, but find the golden mean. This works well for courage: the courageous person is moved neither too much nor too little by fear. There is a class of virtues, though, that call for a minor modification of Aristotle's model. These are what I am calling the virtues of integrity. In these cases, it is not balance one seeks but wholeness, and always wholeness of a specific sort.

Let me illustrate with a virtue I will call serious-playfulness. This ideal is found in various forms throughout the history of humanistic art, literature, and philosophy. "A man's maturity," Nietzsche says, "consists in having found again the seriousness one had as a child, at play."¹³ That this is a virtue of integrity is plain to see, for it involves holding together parts of the human drama that often become disjoined. What is important to see is that the possessor of this excellence is not just a little bit serious and a little bit playful. For it is only when one has both that one has either. People who lack seriousness are not simply playful. They are frivolous. Those who have forgotten how to play are likewise left holding much less than half the bag, for they will have mistaken gravity for true seriousness. When this species of integrity unravels, we find ourselves approaching one situation with gravity, and another with frivolity, but lacking true serious-playfulness (or playful seriousness) in all situations.

Returning to Aristotle, we can see that, at least for this type of virtue, the vice pairs are opposed, like hot and cold, but the virtue is not simply warm. The virtue involves getting past the illusion of their opposition, and finding our way back to the place where the true pair of traits can be re-integrated into the complex whole in which they belong. Now we can if want refer to this ideal state of synthesis and integration as the virtue, but flawed creatures like ourselves never achieve this ideal. The moral life, like sailing, is all about tacking. And this suggests that while there may indeed be one capital V virtue, there are little v virtue pairs that correspond with the vice pairs in each case.

Specifically, there are two characteristic movements of re-integration in each case.

So, to return to our previous example, if the Virtue is serious-playfulness, the virtues are, first, that special sort of laughter and irreverence that, speaking only figuratively of course, puts the fart cushion under the associate dean of initiatives and proclamations. And, second, that special sort of wake-up call, keyed to the particular situation, when one can reinsert and reassert the forgotten stakes of an activity. The virtue of serious-play is not only a virtue of integrity, but a hallmark of humanism wherever and whenever it appears. It is one of the signature elements of humane letters that they contain this laughter and issue this wake up call, rescuing us when we have lapsed into gravity or frivolity.

Let us consider another species of integrity, another human excellence that constitutes a kind of wholeness that unravels all too easily. I will call this second integral virtue realism/idealism. The clunky name again serves to signal that the one thing we are after is to hold two things together, two things that are not easy to hold together. What I am referring to here is the striven for but never reached state of maturity in which we feel genuine hope and genuine acceptance. Similar to my analysis of serious-play, I want to claim that these two cognitive-emotive states tend to rise or fall together. As with before, I want to say that when this form of integrity unravels, what we get are two impostors to the ideals they mimic, which in their new form seem to be opposites. What sometimes masquerades as idealism would be better called fantasy. This is when we point to unsullied ideals and conjure an as-if world. What sometimes masquerades as realism, I would call banality or even aggressive banality, namely the equation of the real with our conventional names for those aspects of the real we care to notice. The genuine idealist is not airy and sentimental but disappointed, and *cranky*. Fantasy is no closer to true idealism than is banality. Both are forms of cynicism, one in which we settle for ersatz hope and one in which we settle for ersatz acceptance.

Humane letters in this area then are those that remind us how to recover from either of these two forms of cynicism. Here we might speak of the imagination, of imaginative literature, as coming in two broad varieties: (1) the poetic, or that which resolves fixities back into possibilities; and the (2) the prosodic, or that which deflates the airy and sentimental. In other words, the poetic is sublimating and the prosodic desublimating. The former need not be actual verse: think of Emerson; the latter need not be literal prose: think of Ashbery.

Were there more time, we could enumerate other aspects of integrity and the humane. For example, we could return to the specific methodological issue with which we began. For it is another of the virtues of integrity to be able to find a way of working that is at once truly disciplined and truly in touch

with the real world in its complexity. Here, when the virtue unravels, we find ourselves confronted with the false choice of academicism and anti-intellectualism. Or we could consider a closely related species of integrity which enables us to see the universal in the particular, rather than settling for either schematic generalities or myopic specifics. In the history of humanistic education, wisdom was associated with eloquence, which was understood not as elegant speech but the ability to find the particulars that would capture the whole of a subject.¹⁴

In conclusion, I have been using this phrase "humane letters" to name a set of specific saving strategies preserved in literary works. The figures we admire in thought and action, in praxis (if we can still stomach this horribly overused term) have, in a concrete time and place and situation, found a way to chart a course correction, and to fashion a vehicle for helping us navigate away from whichever failing is nearer to us.

With the term humane letters, we dignify such vehicles and the figures who fashioned them. Though the tacking maneuvers we will need to make will not be identical to any yet navigated, we preserve certain texts and arts of reading so that we may learn how these past vehicles were built, what course corrections have been successfully attempted, chart by comparison our own bearings, and reach again for the specific virtues of integrity.

NOTES

¹See Angela Hurley, "Humane Intellectuals: Being Present to Humanity and the World," *Philosophical Studies in Education* 40, 9-24.

² They are related as follows. Somebody who has integrity in the first sense refuses to act against principle even when nobody is looking. They are not one person for others and a different person in private. Thus, we say that they are whole or have integrity. This duplicity is not, however, the only species of dividedness from which a self may suffer, and thus the excellence of integrity goes beyond this specific moral virtue of conscientiousness that also bears its name.

³Hurley, "Humane Intellectuals," 14.

⁴ Too many papers in the foundations, it seems to me, have a divisive rhetoric. They ask us to sneer and cheer. They put the author on the side of the angels and suggest that the reader better hurry up and choose a side.

⁵ Noam Chomsky, "A Review of Bf Skinner's *Verbal Behaviour*," *Language* 35, no. 1 (1959); reprinted in *Readings in Language and Mind*, eds. Heimir Geirsson, Michael Losonsky (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996): 413-41.

⁶ Everyone knows that it is "publish or perish," but let us break this down for a moment, into four distinct ideas: (1) that universities should only hire, retain, and promote professors who perform well; (2) that performance is to be gauged primarily in terms of scholarship; (3) that scholarship can be gauged through publications; and (4) that quantity is the best indicator of the worth of what one has published. In three quick steps we get from an unobjectionable premise (1) to an absurd conclusion (4).

⁷ Bruce Wilshire, *The Moral Collapse of the University: Professionalism, Purity, Alienation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990); David Damrosch, *We Scholars: Changing the Culture of the University* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Owen Barfield, *Worlds Apart* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1964).

⁸ J. S. Mill, "The Six Great Humanistic Essays of John Stuart Mill", ed. A. W. Levi (New York: Washington Square Press, 1963).

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, "We Classicists", trans. William Arrowsmith, in *Unmodern Observations: Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*, ed. William Arrowsmith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Friedrich Nietzsche, "Schopenhauer as Educator" (1874), trans. William Arrowsmith, in *Unmodern Observations: Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*, ed. William Arrowsmith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

¹⁰ Nietzsche, "Schopenhauer as Educator", 205.

¹¹ Louis Malle, *My Dinner with Andre* (New Yorker Films, 1981).

¹² Seminar presentation, Fudan-UIUC Advanced Training and Research Seminar on Philosophy of Education, College of Education, University of Illinois, Champaign, IL, July 7-9, 2008.

¹³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), §94, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), 83.

¹⁴ Donald Phillip Verene, *The Art of Humane Education* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002), 2 ff.
