



MY FELLOW HUMANISTS

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"Perhaps Culture is Now the Counterculture"

A Defense of the Humanities

By **Leon Wieseltier**

On May 19, New Republic literary editor Leon Wieseltier spoke at the commencement ceremony of Brandeis University, addressing the graduates as "fellow humanists." Here is a text of his talk.

Has there ever been a moment in American life when the humanities were cherished less, and has there ever been a moment in American life when the humanities were needed more? I am genuinely honored to be addressing you this morning, because in recent years I have come to regard a commitment to the humanities as nothing less than an act of intellectual defiance, of cultural dissidence.

For decades now in America we have been witnessing a steady and sickening denigration of humanistic understanding and humanistic method. We live in a society inebriated by technology, and happily, even giddily governed by the values of utility, speed, efficiency, and convenience. The technological mentality that has become the American worldview

instructs us to prefer practical questions to questions of meaning—to ask of things not if they are true or false, or good or evil, but how they work. Our reason has become an instrumental reason, and is no longer the reason of the philosophers, with its ancient magnitude of intellectual ambition, its belief that the proper subjects of human thought are the largest subjects, and that the mind, in one way or another, can penetrate to the very principles of natural life and human life. Philosophy itself has shrunk under the influence of our weakness for instrumentality—modern American philosophy was in fact one of the causes of that weakness—and generally it, too, prefers to tinker and to tweak.

The machines to which we have become enslaved, all of them quite astonishing, represent the greatest assault on human attention ever devised: they are engines of mental and spiritual dispersal, which make us wider only by making us less deep. There are thinkers, reputable ones if you can believe it, who proclaim that the exponential growth in computational ability will soon take us beyond the finitude of our bodies and our minds so that, as one of them puts it, there will no longer be any difference between human and machine. La Mettrie lives in Silicon Valley. This, of course, is not an apotheosis of the human but an abolition of the human; but Google is very excited by it.

In the digital universe, knowledge is reduced to the status of information. Who will any longer remember that knowledge is to information as art is to kitsch—that information is the most inferior kind of knowledge, because it is the most external? A great Jewish thinker of the early Middle Ages wondered why God, if He wanted us to know the truth about everything, did not simply tell us the truth about everything. His wise answer was that if we were merely told what we need to know, we would not, strictly speaking, know it. Knowledge can be acquired only over time and only by method. And the devices that we carry like addicts in our hands are disfiguring our mental lives also in other ways: for example, they generate a hitherto unimaginable number of numbers, numbers about everything under the sun, and so they are transforming us into a culture of data, into a cult of data, in which no human activity and no human expression is immune to quantification, in which happiness is a fit subject for economists, in which the ordeals of the human heart are inappropriately translated into mathematical expressions, leaving us with new illusions of clarity and new illusions of control.

Our glittering age of technologism is also a glittering age of scientism. Scientism is not the same thing as science. Science is a blessing, but scientism is a curse. Science, I mean what practicing scientists actually do, is acutely and admirably aware of its limits, and humbly admits to the provisional character of its conclusions; but scientism is dogmatic, and

peddles certainties. It is always at the ready with the solution to every problem, because it believes that the solution to every problem is a scientific one, and so it gives scientific answers to non-scientific questions. But even the question of the place of science in human existence is not a scientific question. It is a philosophical, which is to say, a humanistic, question.

Owing to its preference for totalistic explanation, scientism transforms science into an ideology, which is of course a betrayal of the experimental and empirical spirit. There is no perplexity of human emotion or human behavior that these days is not accounted for genetically or in the cocksure terms of evolutionary biology. It is true that the selfish gene has lately been replaced by the altruistic gene, which is lovelier, but it is still the gene that tyrannically rules. Liberal scientism should be no more philosophically attractive to us than conservative scientism, insofar as it, too, arrogantly reduces all the realms that we inhabit to a single realm, and tempts us into the belief that the epistemological eschaton has finally arrived, and at last we know what we need to know to manipulate human affairs wisely. This belief is invariably false and occasionally disastrous. We are becoming ignorant of ignorance.

So there is no task more urgent in American intellectual life at this hour than to offer some resistance to the twin imperialisms of science and technology, and to recover the old distinction—once bitterly contested, then generally accepted, now almost completely forgotten—between the study of nature and the study of man. As Bernard Williams once remarked, “‘humanity’ is a name not merely for a species but also for a quality.” You who have elected to devote yourselves to the study of literature and languages and art and music and philosophy and religion and history—you are the stewards of that quality. You are the resistance. You have had the effrontery to choose interpretation over calculation, and to recognize that calculation cannot provide an accurate picture, or a profound picture, or a whole picture, of self-interpreting beings such as ourselves; and I commend you for it.

Do not believe the rumors of the obsolescence of your path. If Proust was a neuroscientist, then you have no urgent need of neuroscience, because you have Proust. If Jane Austen was a game theorist, then you have no reason to defect to game theory, because you have Austen. There is no greater bulwark against the twittering acceleration of American consciousness than the encounter with a work of art, and the experience of a text or an image. You are the representatives, the saving remnants, of that encounter and that experience, and of the serious study of that encounter and that experience—which is

to say, you are the counterculture. Perhaps culture is now the counterculture.

So keep your heads. Do not waver. Be very proud. Use the new technologies for the old purposes. Do not be rattled by numbers, which will never be the springs of wisdom. In upholding the humanities, you uphold the honor of a civilization that was founded upon the quest for the true and the good and the beautiful. For as long as we are thinking and feeling creatures, creatures who love and imagine and suffer and die, the humanities will never be dispensable. From this day forward, then, act as if you are indispensable to your society, because—whether it knows it or not—you are.

Congratulations.

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