

**Humanities Therapy:
Restoring Well-Being in an Age of Culturally-Induced Illness**

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Introduction

Distinguished Members of the International Organizing Committee, Fellow Practitioners, Esteemed Friends and Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you very much for inviting me to deliver this address. It's a signal honor to open this important conference, and a delight to have the opportunity to share with you some thoughts on its vital mission and central theme.

The structure of this address is two-fold. First, I should like to ground the notion of Humanities Therapy in its larger historical context, briefly tracing the birth and development of the Humanities themselves, along with the allied concept of humanism, initially from a Western perspective. In the process, I will also and inevitably juxtapose Western and Asian traditions. Asian humanism predates its Western counterparts by centuries, but its teachings remained unknown to the mainstream West until relatively recently. Ever since the 1960s, holistic Asian therapies have become increasingly pervasive and popular in the West, because they offer robust remedies to the panoply of culturally-induced illnesses currently afflicting Western nations. Viewed in the context of the history of ideas, Humanities Therapy as compassed by this conference represents the evolution of a celebrated and venerated idea, whose time for re-renewal is nigh.

Second, I should like to expand upon a central claim (or rather, a cluster of claims) of this conference's *Call for Papers*, claims that would be viewed as heretical in orthodox Western psychiatric and psychological circles. To quote from the *Call for Papers*:

Many people in affluent societies have become increasingly vulnerable to motivational problems and mental illnesses ... This is the paradox of material wellbeing ... the relentless pursuit of material wealth neglects basic human concerns such as happiness, morality and mental health, in turn causing emotional and motivational difficulties with potentially serious psychological, social and economic consequences. The underlying problems are philosophical in nature and cannot be resolved by scientific, technological or medical interventions. They require solutions drawn from philosophy and the humanities.

In the process of fleshing out these claims, which I endorse whole-heartedly, it will be useful to amplify and to sharpen the overall thesis which they entail. Baldly stated, it amounts to this: Many if not most of the current broad-spectrum health problems afflicting inhabitants of the developed world -- including obesity, depression, attention deficit disorders, social anxiety disorders, sexual dysfunctions, and a plethora of unnamed disorders triggered by cumulative side-effects of prescription drug cocktails -- are illnesses caused primarily by cultural and not biological factors. They are problems that touch the core of what it means to be human, and to live a fulfilling life, and indeed they must be solved in commensurately human domains, namely those of the Humanities.

The undeniable and remarkable successes of modern science and technology, when exploited by big business interests for pure profit motive, with governments as willing accomplices to the colonization of medicine by pharmaceutical and insurance industries, have exacerbated the foregoing paradox to an unwholesome and unviable extent. On the one hand, quantity of life (i.e. life expectancy) has almost doubled in the developed world during the past century, owing largely to progress in medical science and technology; on the other, quality of life (not to be confused with material comforts) has palpably diminished during the past half-century, owing to increasingly conspicuous neglect of the humanities, broadly construed.

Against this backdrop, the institutionalized paint-by-numbers diagnoses and knee-jerk medication of human beings whose problem is precisely their dehumanization and over-medicalization, is wrong-headed, fraudulent, harmful, and destined only to worsen the very problems it causes, while professing to offer "cures." That uncritical populations subscribe to such mistreatment *en masse* is the best evidence that what they really need is re-education and re-orientation to their fundamental and essential humanity; while the monumental hubris of the powers that be, who collectively sustain this fraud, promulgate its myths, and vend its snake-oils, is a sum of blind arrogance sufficient to collapse the very culture that has given rise to them. A sorry state of affairs, indeed.

The Rise of Humanities in the West

We can recognize three great historical phases in the Western emergence of humanities and its cognate concept, humanism: the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the secular phase. Humanities Therapy itself has the potential to become a fourth historical phase. Let us briefly revisit the first three.

Renaissance Humanism

Renaissance humanism emerged in Italy during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The term "humanist" itself was coined much later, in 1808, by the German educator F.J. Niethammer, but the Latin term "*umanista*" was current in Renaissance Italy, where it meant a student or scholar of human affairs and human nature. Its focus was on human dignity and human potential in the City of Man, and beyond that on man's place and purpose in the cosmos. Such questions were addressed not to repudiate Roman Catholic theology, but rather to evolve it. Renaissance humanism in the Italian universities, and

later at Oxford and Paris, was intended to counter the stultifying effects of medieval scholasticism, which had throttled inquiry. The rediscovery of ancient Greek and Roman philosophers, whose works were preserved in Arabic during the preceding "Golden Age" of the Caliphs in North Africa and Iberia, prompted Renaissance humanists to exercise both reason and evidence of the senses in their re-conception of the human enterprise. They viewed the Greco-Roman classics as complete and authoritative guides to leading a morally good life in the City of Man, as a worthy preparation for life everlasting in the City of God.

Thus Renaissance humanism marked a decisive evolution in practical theology. While the Dark Ages had lauded the virtues of humility, modesty, piety, and devotion, the Renaissance encouraged introspection, self-reflection, articulation of man's place in nature, and mimetic materialization of Platonic ideals such as Beauty. Thus the classical arts -- music, poetry, philosophy, rhetoric, literature, painting, sculpture, architecture -- were elevated to new and unsurpassed heights. Far from being regarded as exercises in vanity or violations of the First Commandment, the arts were venerated and celebrated as exemplary human achievements, whose appreciation became increasingly synonymous with the notion of good citizenship, and wholly compatible with, if not essential to, life conceived as a pathway leading toward God. In consequence,

Both the republican elites of Florence and Venice and the ruling families of Milan, Ferrara, and Urbino hired humanists to teach their children classical morality and to write elegant, classical letters, histories, and propaganda.¹

Within a few decades, and perhaps inevitably in such an ethos, this culminated in the election of a humanist Pope:

Pius II was the first real humanist to sit in the chair of Peter. Born in Siena as Enea Silvio Piccolomini, he acquired a reputation as a diplomat, belletrist, and womanizer, and was crowned poet laureate by the Emperor Frederick in 1442. After serving the emperor and the anti-Roman Council of Basel, Piccolomini joined the Roman camp in 1446. He became a cardinal in 1456 and in 1458 was elected pope. As pope, the only work of scholarship he was able to continue was his "Commentaries," a remarkably frank autobiography in which he put his passions and prejudices on full view.²

Renaissance humanism gave rise to an important and influential generation of scholars, poets, and belletrists including Erasmus in Holland, Thomas More in England, Francois Rabelais in France, Francesco Petrarch and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola in Italy. Its most momentous paradigmatic accomplishment was its reconciliation of philosophy and theology, reason and faith, however precarious. Emblematic of this phase is Raphael's celebrated painting, *The School of Athens*. It reconciles the differences between Plato and Aristotle, asserting that we must indeed awaken our minds to apprehend the Pure Forms, while at the same time we must instrumentalize evidence of the senses to measure the cosmos and all it contains, including ourselves.



figure 1: Raphael's "School of Athens"

Thus Raphael's reconciliation of theology and philosophy also entails a reconciliation of theology and science, a fruitful co-existence that persisted throughout the Enlightenment phase, until a proliferation of secular humanisms allied themselves with science and became popular substitutes for theology itself.

However, Roman Catholic infatuation with Renaissance humanism soon fell on thorny ground, primarily as a result of the Protestant reformation. Given the Protestant view that each man could sustain his own relationship with God, without the necessity of an intermediary (i.e. a priest), humanism in the hands of Protestants became a vehicle for exploring the City of Man, and man's place in nature, for their own sakes, and not for any overarching religious purpose. This notion would soon drive a wedge between the Roman Church and Enlightenment humanism.

But let us reiterate that Renaissance humanism was fully compatible with Roman Catholic religious belief, thanks in no small measure to Plato. The Italian Renaissance was decisively neo-Platonist in character, owing to a perfect fit between Plato's ontology and the Christian Trinity. While Nietzsche may have been sociologically correct in attributing the early successes of Christianity in ancient Rome to the hope it proffered to otherwise hapless slaves, an ontological reading of the Trinity shows that it bears uncanny correspondence to Plato's forms, copies, and essences: metaphysical precursors of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Enlightenment Humanism

The second phase, Enlightenment humanism, can be seen as both a continuation and a rejection of Renaissance humanism, with a growing and palpable political tension between theology and natural philosophy. On the one hand, the exercise of reason informed by evidence of the senses swiftly outgrew its theological confines, became known as "natural philosophy" then "experimental philosophy" (the terminological precursor of science), and gained explanatory power over natural processes that rivaled and began to supersede theological accounts. From this perspective, Enlightenment humanism can be characterized as an anti-theological movement, which sought liberation from the dogmatic and authoritarian constraints of Lutheranism and Calvinism, from the neo-scholastic Jesuit counter-reformation, and from the Divine Right of Kings.

Thus Galileo, Hook, and Newton removed physics from a branch of theology to a science in its own right, as did Boyle, Priestley, and Lavoisier with chemistry, and (later) Lamarck, Wallace, and Darwin, with biology. Hobbes, Spinoza, and Rousseau did the same with political science, as did the signatories of the US Declaration of Independence. The emancipation of science from religious dogma, the separation of Church from State, and the emergence of constitutional democracies and civil liberties, were epistemological and political sides of one and the same Enlightenment coin.

Even so, most Enlightenment humanists were still fervent believers in God. While they needed personal and professional freedom from dogma, and other corruptions of institutionalized religion, in order to practice what we today would call "good science," they were still, for the most part, theists of one stripe or another. The freedom to think autonomously and objectively about nature and man's place in it, which had been carved out by Renaissance humanists and expanded by Enlightenment humanists, did nothing to disprove God's existence. So Hobbes and Spinoza believed in a "material God," while Newton was a Creationist; Thomas Jefferson, a Deist; Charles Darwin, a Vitalist. Galileo (like many physicists to come, including Einstein), believed that the fundamental language of nature is mathematics, and that God is therefore, among other things, a divine mathematician.

$$\begin{aligned} & \text{And God said:} \\ & \nabla \cdot \mathbf{D} = \rho \\ & \nabla \cdot \mathbf{B} = 0 \\ & \nabla \times \mathbf{E} = -\frac{\partial \mathbf{B}}{\partial t} \\ & \nabla \times \mathbf{H} = \mathbf{i} + \frac{\partial \mathbf{D}}{\partial t} \\ & \text{And there was light.} \end{aligned}$$

figure 2: Maxwell's equations

Nonetheless, just as the seeds of Enlightenment humanism were sown during the Renaissance, so too were the seeds of (later) secular humanism sown during the Enlightenment. As Enlightenment mathematics and sciences exhibited ever-greater explanatory power, it became consistently possible to adopt agnostic and even atheistic positions. British empiricist David Hume was an unrepentant atheist, and so became known as "the infidel." When the towering French mathematician, Simon de Laplace, was asked by Emperor Napoleon why his five-volume masterwork on *Celestial Mechanics* contained not as single mention of God, Laplace famously replied "I have no need of that hypothesis."



figure 3: clockwork cosmos

Newton and Laplace, among many others, ushered in an era of mechanism and determinism that produced the so-called "paradox of the Enlightenment": Free and reasoned inquiry into man's place in nature gave rise to a clockwork cosmos in which all was predetermined from initial conditions, including supposedly free and reasoned inquiry itself. At the social scientific end of this spectrum, two of the most influential intellectuals of the late 19th century, Herbert Spencer and Karl Marx, both extrapolated this Newtonian "paradigm shift" into social science. Rather notoriously, Spencer coined the contentious phrase "survival of the fittest" in his sociological re-interpretation of Darwinism, and applied it pseudo-deterministically to justify British imperialism. Even more notoriously, Karl Marx proposed "dialectical materialism" in his attempt to reformulate historical and economic laws. Spencer was an agnostic; Marx, an atheist. Thomas Carlyle, another leading intellectual of the day, opined that "The soul is a gas; and the next world, a coffin." These and kindred views paved the way for the coming age of secular humanism.

Secular Humanism

This third phase, secular humanism, could not be further removed from the well-intended Renaissance humanism that had indirectly given rise to it. Once Enlightenment humanism had stripped the universe of God, of vital forces, and of souls, it fell to philosophers and psychologists to redefine what precious little remained of man. It did not take them long to do so, as the remnants were meager indeed. Secular humanism swiftly came to represent the *denouement* of Renaissance humanism, the terminus of Enlightenment humanism, the philosophical impoverishment of the human being, and the psychological debilitation of the human condition, thus sowing the very seeds that engendered the fourth phase, namely Humanities Therapy, which has gathered us here today.

The term "secular" was coined in 1851, by George Jacob Holyoake, and secularisms swiftly gathered strength in erudite Western circles, spreading to popular culture through a variety of secular humanist vehicles, including positivism and Marxism in the 19th century, and existentialism and behaviorism in the 20th. Although the romantic rebellion against the mechanization of man shaped the enlightened secularism of German humanists like Dilthey and Gadamer, heirs to Goethe's transcendent humanistic genius, popular imagination was roused to more fevered pitches by Marxism and existentialism.

In a universe denuded by science of God, spirit, and soul, it remained for existentialists to strip man of Plato's forms, essences and copies. In Plato's ontology, essence precedes existence. In existentialism's ontology, existence precedes essence. On this latter view, man is a purposeless material end-product of a long and impersonal chain of cosmic events, that have unfolded in a cold, cruel, heartless and morally insensate universe. Our challenge, then, is neither to lead a good life as God commands, nor to lead an examined life infused with the essence of goodness in order to apprehend the Pure Form of Good, as Plato instructs. For Nietzsche had pronounced God "dead-on-arrival" at the close of the 19th century, while Heidegger and his student Sartre provided robust refutations of Platonic essentialism, well into the 20th.

On an existential view, man is catapulted from the void into a Godless and purposeless world, a universe born of an accidental fluctuation of quantum nothingness. Man is a creature biologically equipped to cling desperately to the edge of the abyss of this nothingness from which he sprang, and to which he will return in a scandalously brief time. He has no choice but to confront the stark nakedness of this existence, and to realize that he must choose his human essence, for good or for ill. These brute facts of existence provide no valid inference to normative claims, as the infidel Hume had shown; and similarly they provide no sound evidence of normative essences or their forms, as most empiricists argue. Lacking a soul, a Buddha nature, or any other human essence, Sartre condemns man to be free, free only to choose between instrumentally good or evil values, knowing full well that many will choose evil. "Hell is other people," wrote Sartre.

The existentialist hero or heroine is thus a Sisyphean character, whose enterprise is doomed to fail, precisely because he is condemned to be free. It is often much simpler to

chose evil, simpler in the biological sense of moving with the herd, or in the physical sense of flowing with the current, or rolling the boulders downhill with the gradient. Confronting this nihilistic existence usually leads to a catharsis of despair, during which one can however make deeply authentic choices, or so the existentialists claim. Existentialism is a heroic philosophy, which has nonetheless depressed a lot of people at every stage of its digestion. Even so, Sartre explicitly defended the thesis that existentialism is a humanism.

(For that matter, legions of Marx's followers also consider Marx a humanist, and of course his influence is so enormous that one can find evidence both for and against this claim.)

The depressing effects of existentialism on 20th century mass-man are epitomized by Woody Allen in his film *Play it Again, Sam*. In his familiar role of a pathetic, neurotic, tragicomic, love-starved protagonist, Allen tries to pick up a woman whom he encounters contemplating an abstract impressionist painting in a Manhattan museum:



figure 4: a Jackson Pollock

Allen: "It's a lovely Jackson Pollock."

Woman. "Yes, it is."

Allen: "What does it say to you?"

Woman: "It restates the negativeness of the universe. The hideous, lonely emptiness of existence. Nothingness. The predicament of man forced to live in a barren, godless eternity, like a tiny flame flickering in an immense void, with

nothing but waste, horror and degradation forming a useless straightjacket in a black absurd cosmos."

Allen: "What are you doing Saturday?"

Woman: "Committing suicide."

Allen: "What about Friday night?"

Secular humanism of this kind has reduced human life to a futile thermodynamic cycle: negentropy and entropy, manifested biologically as sex and death, psychologically as Eros and Thanatos, Freud's two postulated primary instincts.

For Freud too was a materialist and an atheist, and albeit in various distinctive ways, a secular humanist. He excavated the human psyche to reveal the psycho-biological bedrock of good and evil, which not being essences must be caused. The Freudian causes turn out to be not values that we choose in a Sartrean way; rather unconsciously-embedded values that we have internalized, having been proffered as bait by external authority figures. If we take the bait, they promise to accept, gratify, or even (God help us) love us.

Freud's theory of human nature is a deeper circle of Hell than Sartre's. For Sartre's Hell is merely the external sociological circle: the Hell of others trying to inflict their conflicting and oft-conflicted values on us. Whereas Freud's Hell is the psychological circle, within which we have internalized familial, social, religious, and political authority. All these voices vie for command of each person's unconscious, and most people, with the apparent exception of many Hippies and a few philosophers, seem congenitally predisposed to allow this unconscious chorus to ground their ship of personhood on Freudian reefs, or these days, Heaven help them, on the much more richly encrusted DSM.

This fundamental thesis of Freud's 1929 *Civilization and Its Discontents* is found in Hobbes's 1651 *Leviathan*, and so Hobbes can be credited as the forerunner of Freud. Hobbes had bravely and flatly contradicted Augustine's core doctrine of Original Sin, by writing that "the desires and passions of man, are in themselves no sin." Unwittingly rehearsing Hobbes's seminal argument, Freud transmuted "original sin" to "original neurosis."

Yet the most extreme and potentially odious form of secular humanism emerged neither as philosophy nor psychoanalysis; rather, as behavioral psychology. It fell to behavioral psychologists to mechanize man epistemologically. In behaviorist theory, the existence of autonomous and causally efficacious mental functions is ignored, pre-empted, or denied. Man reverts to a learning machine, programmable by operant conditioning, subliminal messaging, relentless propaganda, and -- in Aldous Huxley's prescient vision -- drugs like Soma.

Aldous Huxley was descended from a line of distinguished British biologists, including Thomas Henry Huxley, otherwise known as "Darwin's Bulldog" for his spirited public defenses of Darwinism against the attacks of crusading Creationist Bishop Wilberforce. Aldous was also a relative of Julian Huxley, the 20th century biologist who coined the neologism and genetic concept of a "clade" and "cladogenesis." Significantly, Julian Huxley was also a leading secular humanist, having convened the International Humanist and Ethical Union in 1952. The American roots of organized Humanism can be traced back to the University of Chicago in the 1920s, from which emerged the first *Humanist Manifesto* of 1933, among whose signatories was John Dewey. These secular humanists were not existentialists *per se*, but they shared the existentialist views of repudiating supernatural religious beliefs, and asserting that human fate reposed on human choice. But these humanists nonetheless hitched their wagons of human aspiration to emergent scientific stars: psychics, biology, and psychology.

While Aldous Huxley was more than scientifically literate enough to appreciate the potential benefits to humanity of reliable knowledge in emergent biological sciences such as genetics, he was also politically astute enough to warn that biological science could become a totalitarian mechanism of social and political control. In his prescient and chilling novel *Brave New World*, Aldous predicted the phenomenon of cloning, and bundled it with the behavioral conditioning and mass-drugging of cloned populations in tandem with their mass-stupefaction by video entertainment. His dystopia showcased a "culture" of zombies, utterly bereft of human essence. In many respects, *Brave New World* was a preview of contemporary post-modern, post-Christian, post-humanist, post-literate America.

On October 21, 1949, Aldous Huxley wrote to George Orwell, expressing praise and also horror at Orwell's political dystopia, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

"Within the next generation I believe that the world's leaders will discover that infant conditioning and narco-hypnosis are more efficient, as instruments of government, than clubs and prisons, and that the lust for power can be just as completely satisfied by suggesting people into loving their servitude as by flogging them and kicking them into obedience."

Indeed, the consuming American masses become enslaved to psychotherapy, and more recently to pharmacology, as failed panaceas for the panoply of discontents that have emerged from the materialization, mechanization, and dehumanization of human beings.

The Two Cultures

Yet perhaps strange to say, the first half of the 20th century also saw a flowering of Humanities and The Arts in the universities: Classics, Romance Languages, Religious Studies, Philosophy, Literature, Poetry, Music, Dance, Theater, Painting, Photography, and Film all experienced growth and expansion within academe, even as sciences and technologies began to define the leading edge of progress.

Thus, in his watershed Rede Lecture of 1959, British scientist C.P. Snow coined the phrase “The Two Cultures” to describe the bifurcation of human mentation and cognition into Humanities and Sciences, a division that holds palpable sway over human orientation throughout our entire system of higher education today. But when Snow delivered his epoch-making lecture, secular public intellectuals (whose overarching role is to shape and reinforce human self-conception on large scales) were mostly drawn from the Humanities wing, while public awareness of Science lagged far behind. Philosophers and poets, playwrights and painters, captured the public imagination, while science was seen as an incomprehensible and somewhat alien pursuit that attracted eccentrics and social misfits. So in 1959, C.P. Snow voiced this poignant complaint in *The Two Cultures*:

I remember G. H. Hardy once remarking to me in mild puzzlement, some time in the 1930s, "Have you noticed how the word "intellectual" is used nowadays? There seems to be a new definition which certainly doesn't include Rutherford or Eddington or Dirac or Adrian or me? It does seem rather odd, don't y'know."³

If C.P. Snow were alive today, he'd surely change his tune. Within a few decades after his Rede lecture, the most influential public intellectuals were scientists: from Richard Dawkins to Steven J. Gould, from E.O. Wilson to Steven Hawking.

And the most influential public intellectuals in the humanities wing, such as Foucault, Lyotard, and Derrida, were postmodernists and therefore also anti-humanists. They and their followers have actually deconstructed the Humanities canon, allowing their minions to wallow in ignorance of, among other things, the Great Books embedded in the foundations of world civilizations. I recall a horrifying but typical keynote address by Stanley Fish, one of the leading darknesses of American deconstruction, in which he bragged about removing Plato's *Republic* from the reading lists of his graduate courses in humanities, thus depriving his students, and their students to come, of pondering Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, and so ironically guaranteeing that they will remain chained to the cave wall, oblivious to the distinction between appearance and reality. Indeed, postmodernism's American high prophets, such as Richard Rorty, took especial pains to deny not only the existence of God, but also the existence of extramental reality: a denial of theology and science both! This signals a total reversal of Renaissance humanism, which had reconciled the two. Post-modernism is post-humanistic, and antithetical if not antagonistic to humanistic values. It is not a way forward; rather, an ideological impoverishment and doctrinaire enslavement of the human being.



figure 5: Plato's Cave

Thanks in no small part to the jargon-ridden and politically correct manifestations of postmodernism, and its cadres of culturally feral, politicized and dysfunctional graduates, humanities in the US, the UK, and the EU are now coming under fire by the ignorant technocrats who have colonized the administration of higher education itself. Since the crude "market value" of a well-educated human being is essentially zero in today's postmodern technocracies, there is diminishing justification for the funding of humanities programs themselves. Such programs, including philosophy, are regarded as increasingly "useless" in terms of their measurable outcomes. Our postmodern technocracies have as little place for humanism as the dystopias in Huxley's *Brave New World* and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.⁴

Indeed, the undeniable successes of science and technology have fueled a popular myth that humanities are approaching obsolescence. This stance is epitomized by artificial intelligence (AI) researcher Marvin Minsky: a materialist, atheist, behaviorist, and leading proponent of the "strong AI thesis": a reductionist position which asserts that the human mind is a mere epiphenomenon of the brain, while the brain itself is a mere neuro-chemical computer. Minsky's research at MIT's robotics laboratories entails among other things building robots capable of simulating rudimentary play behaviors of two- or three-year-old children, such as stacking differently shaped and colored blocks atop one another, on command.

On the basis of being able to build a machine that can stack toy building blocks -- say a green pyramid on an orange cylinder a blue cube -- Minsky has condemned the entire edifice of the humanities and the arts. "With all the money that we are throwing away on

humanities and art -- give me that money and I will build you to be a better student."⁵ Such monumental hubris is more than regrettable.

There is also a grand irony at work here, or rather, two ironies. In Snow's Rede Lecture on *The Two Cultures*, he remarks that many erudite humanities scholars were not shy to criticize scientists' deficiencies in the Humanities. Snow turned the tables on them as follows:

A good many times I have been present at gatherings of people who, by the standards of the traditional culture, are thought highly educated and who have with considerable gusto been expressing their incredulity at the illiteracy of scientists. Once or twice I have been provoked and have asked the company how many of them could describe the Second Law of Thermodynamics. The response was cold: it was also negative. Yet I was asking something which is the scientific equivalent of: *Have you read a work of Shakespeare's?*⁶

Now fast-forward a few decades, and we see scientific public intellectuals decrying the uselessness or futility of humanities.

But the deeper irony is this: Americans in general have become grossly deficient on both wings, humanities and sciences alike. The written tradition having been severely eroded by visual and digital media, and deconstructed by postmodernists, appreciation of the Humanities, along with overall cultural literacy, are in a scandalous rate of decline.

But sciences and mathematics are faring no better in the US, which currently ranks 17th in the world in average scientific literacy, and 25th in the world in average mathematical acumen. So we have now reached this ironic pass: There is a dearth of familiarity with Shakespeare on the one hand, and with Thermodynamics on the other.

Americans are plummeting into an abyss of widespread ignorance that resembles nothing if not the Dark Ages that swallowed Europe following the collapse of the Western Roman Empire. And the current collapse is symptomatic of a lack of appreciation of what it means, fundamentally, to be human.

As a case in point, consider the impact of digitization and social media on the relation of friendship. The two greatest virtue ethicists of antiquity, namely Aristotle and Confucius, both lauded the wonderfully salutary aspects of this fundamental human relationship type. Aristotle devoted an entire section of his *Nicomachean Ethics* to friendship, not least for the perfect equality that obtains between friends (as contrasted with the palpable inequalities that obtain within families, and between socio-economic strata). Moreover, the riches of friendship always increase over time, especially if one is fortunate enough to have sustained friendships across several decades.

Confucius also recognized the deep value of friendship, once again as a relationship between equals, a parity not evident, and indeed impossible to attain, in the other modes of the Confucian social matrix (i.e. husband-wife, parent-child, elder-younger, ruler-

subject). So noteworthy is friendship to Confucius that he begins his *Analects* with the observation: “Is it not delightful to have friends coming from afar?”

Now contrast these ancient conceptions of friendship with the likes of Marvin Minsky, who presumably would rather program two robots to “befriend” one another, and then declare that friendship has been reduced to an algorithm.

Even more impoverishing is Facebook’s mutation of friendship from a noun to a verb. To *befriend* someone once entailed cultivating a human relationship; now, to “friend” someone signifies nothing more than a mouse-click. Facebook makes a mockery of the meaning of “friend,” yet it exerts enormous and ongoing transformational power over human cognition. One’s range of potential “friends” is broadened to include virtually the entire global village, yet the quality of such friendships could not be more ephemeral or shallow. They are virtual simulations of friendship, and nothing more.

The distinction between virtual friends, in the Facebook sense, and real friends, in the Aristotelian or Confucian sense, is illustrative of nothing if not the fundamental distinction drawn in Plato's Allegory of the Cave, namely that between reality and appearance. Real friends and virtual friends differ in just this way. To mistake virtual friendship for real friendship is to neglect something fundamentally and universally human.

The Bi-Cameral Brain: Two Cultures, Two Questions

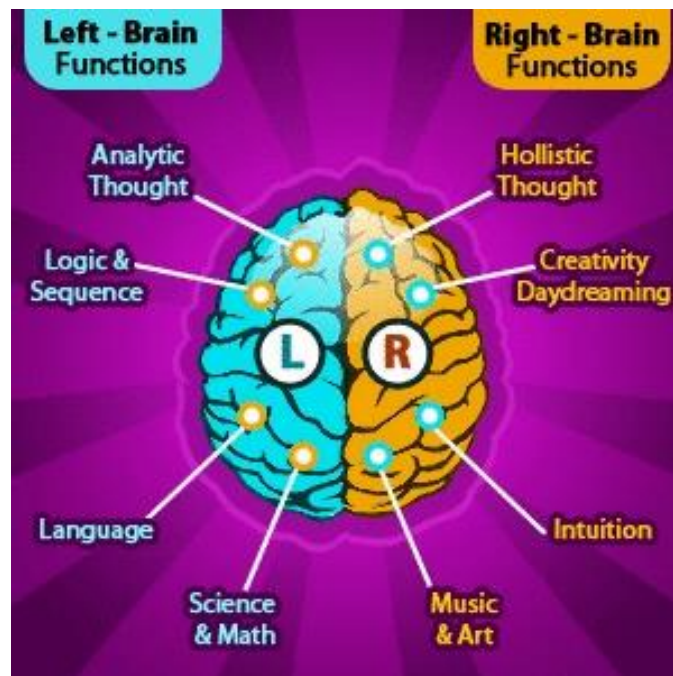


figure 6: Bi-Cameral Brain

In the ensuing decades since Snow's Reid Lecture, popular neuroscience has served only to reinforce and strengthen the divide between *The Two Cultures*. The brain's left hemisphere is now known to house the received functions of logos: speech, reason, logic, mathematics, science; while the brain's right hemisphere is known to house the complementary functions of mythos: emotion, imagery, music, color, creativity. In most contemporary universities, the operationalization of these two hemispheres, via the two cultures to which they have given rise, entails the erection of administrative as well as physical barriers between them, such that hardly any interaction obtains between sciences and humanities -- to their mutual impoverishment.

There is an overarching sense in which the left-brain right-brain distinction represents a false dichotomy. To be sure, many bilateral symmetries in the human form exhibit "handedness," starting with being left-handed or right-handed. In addition to a dominant hand, we also have a dominant foot, a dominant eye, a dominant ear. Why not, then, a dominant cerebral hemisphere?

At the same time, it is both tempting yet misleading to overdraw this distinction. Whether left- or right-handed, we utilize both hands as a matter of course, in myriad ways, throughout each day. Whether left- or right-footed, we similarly and necessarily utilize both legs, whether for walking, running, or dancing. Similarly, binocular vision is superior to monocular vision, just as stereophonic sound is superior to monophonic sound, even if one ear or eye is weaker than another. It follows by not merely by analogy, but more strongly by homology, that bicameral structures and their related executive functions possess a completeness that their monocameral equivalents lack.

This kind of superiority is not a contest of numbers – two legs are not preferable to one merely because two is a larger number. Interesting though they are, eight-legged creatures do not dominate our biosphere. The superiority of bicamerality can reside only in a sublime unifying principle that undergirds or overarches the manifested duality.

Among the most sublime of these, consider the symbol of the Tao. It is necessarily manifested as two rather than one. If it were manifested as one, we would discern nothing. Even then, nothingness could be manifested in two different ways: as white-out, or as blackout. The fact remains that dualities are pervasively manifested throughout all the realms of existence that we can conceive, or experience. It is our constant challenge, in every sphere of human endeavor, to strive to sustain balance and harmony between the duals, so that they complement rather than oppose one another.

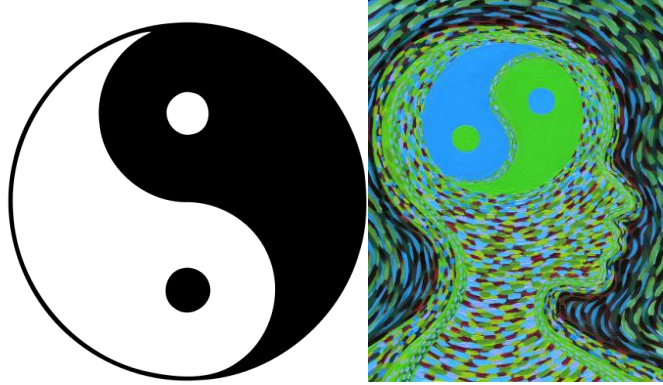


figure 7: Tao

The Tao is equally efficacious as a unifying principle of the brain's bi-camerality. It satisfies not only the logo-centric left brain, but also the mytho-centric right. It can explicate much of physics, and of politics alike. The unifying principle animates both brain hemispheres, and plays no favorites -- although in many situations Lao Tzu defers to yin over yang. Lao Tzu also asserted that the Tao is infinite, and pervades all realms of existence. Since realms of existence have widely differing scales, anything that pervades them all yet retains its self-similarity on every scale, has by definition the nature of a fractal.

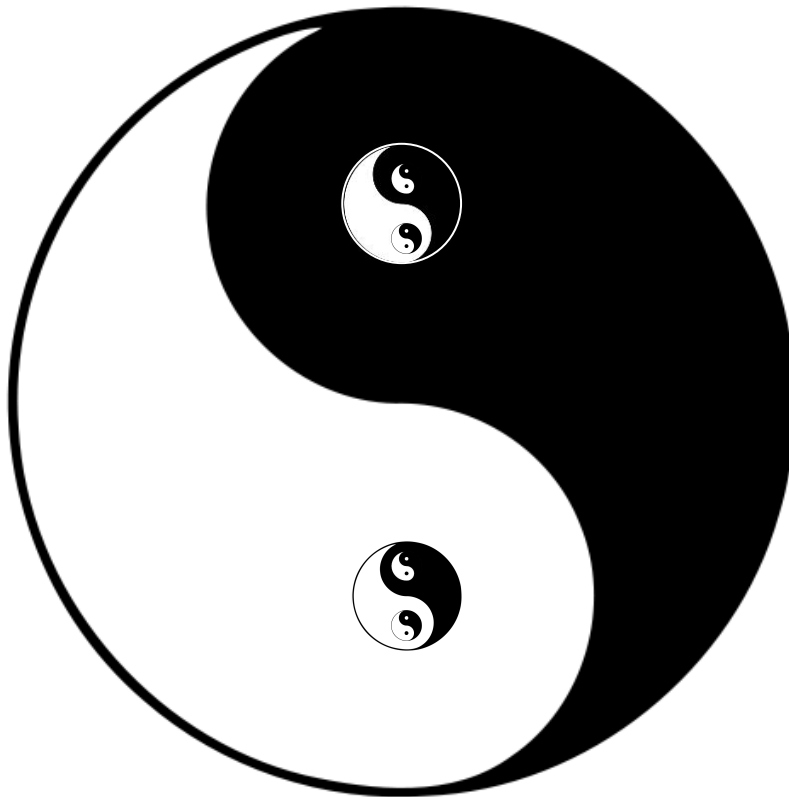


figure 8: fractal Tao

I mention fractal geometry in passing now, but will return to it very soon, with a deeper purpose.

Meanwhile, for a more mundane example of the complementarity of the bi-cameral brain, consider the Neckar cube, a familiar object to every psychology 101 student. The oscillations in our perception of the cube's orientation are perfectly explicable. The left brain immediately perceives that the drawing is a two-dimensional projection of a three-dimensional object, and so it seeks to locate the origin of the projected coordinate system. Only then does it discover that the projection from three dimensions onto two has given rise to an ambiguity, such that there are two possible origins, both consistent with the geometry.

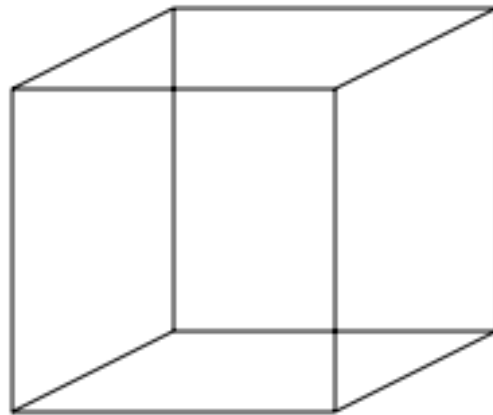


figure 9: Neckar cube

This is not, as is often claimed, an “impossible object.” On the contrary, it’s an object that simultaneously embodies two consistent possibilities. The only “impossibility” is our ability to perceive them both at the same time. We can see only one, or the other, in succession, while we can constantly conceive of the unifying principle.

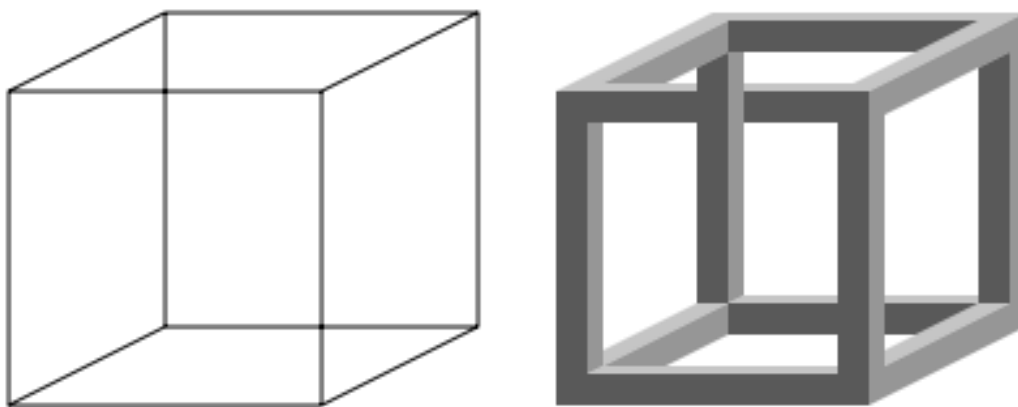


figure 10: ambiguity versus impossibility

The object on the right, drawn by Escher, is truly impossible, in the sense that one cannot build a three-dimensional object such that this object is its 2-dimensional projection. Whereas the Necker cube is merely ambiguous, since we can indeed build a 3-dimensional object such that the Necker cube is its 2-dimensional projection.

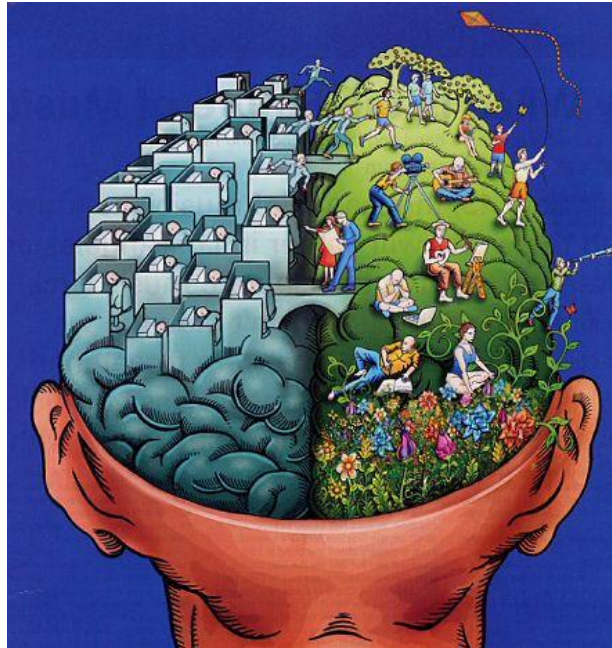
Two brains, two cultures, two orientations: left versus right, science versus humanities, quantification versus qualification. But to overemphasize these difference is to pursue a false dichotomy, and to disregard the unifying principles of consciousness, and of sentience. From Aristotle to Einstein, all great philosophers who engaged in science, and great scientists who engaged in philosophy, appealed time and again to unifying principles.

Aristotle declared "Without an imagination, thinking is impossible"-- thus recognizing that our logical engines are not fully functional unless harnessed to a module that produces images. In claiming this, Aristotle is also refuting a future reductionist and founder of AI, namely Alan Turing, who believed that machines could indeed be made to think. Alas, as no computer has yet been invested with an imagination, no computer can think as Aristotle understood thought, which requires simultaneous use of both hemispheres. Einstein utilized a similar modus operandi to the one suggested by Aristotle: First, Einstein used his imagination to picture physical reality, via thought-experiments. Only when his intuitions were satisfied that he was operating with the correct picture, he then sought mathematical objects which best described the physics as he imagined them to be.

Similarly, we can apply this schema to the arts and sciences, and to the right- and left-brain distinctions that so often divide them. In our context today, we are juxtaposing the healing sciences that stem from the left brain, epitomized by allopathic Western medicine, with the healing arts that stem from the right brain, epitomized by holistic humanistic practices. Again, the two are Taoist complements. Each contains something of the other. Diagnosis and nosology retain characteristics of art-forms, while creative and performing arts embody techniques and methodologies. The brain is far from black-and-white.

Yet, at the same time, two very different fundamental questions arise from the two hemispheres. Scientific diagnosis asks "What's wrong with you?" so that the appropriate medical therapy can be prescribed. By contrast, humanistic dialogue asks "What's right with you?" so that the appropriate humanities therapy can be essayed.

**What's
wrong
with
you?**



**What's
right
with
you?**

figure 11: two cultures, two questions

Sometimes we need to ask medical questions such as “What’s wrong with you?”; at other times, humanistic questions such as “What’s right with you?” Like the Necker cube, this is not an impossible depiction of the human being; rather, a depiction that embodies two consistent possibilities. On any given day, most people have both something wrong with them and something right with them. These two complementary conditions are manifest simultaneously, but are not normally addressable simultaneously. Working on what’s wrong with someone is not the same as working on what’s right with her. We ourselves need to allocate time to both endeavors, just as our clients do.

For a brief example, one of my most memorable clients, namely Jim: a recovering alcoholic who, in his late forties, got accepted into a PhD program and successfully completed his doctorate. What had been wrong with him had led to his alcoholism, but what had been right with him had led to his recovery. Next, via philosophical counseling, he discovered even more things that were right with him, which led to his admission into a PhD. program and an eventual doctorate. Yet even while mobilizing his best intellectual capacities, Jim still had to devote daily energies to taming his worst addictive impulses. So he allocated both the necessary time to address the left-brain question “What’s wrong with me?” (Jim's answer: “I’m a recovering alcoholic”) and the necessary time to address the right-brain question “What’s right with me?” (Jim's answer: "Because I'm recovering alcoholic, I can also be a successful PhD student”).

Now an important insight: These two complementary states – what’s wrong with us and what’s right with us – cannot and do not exist in mutual isolation. As complements, they are interconnected and interpenetrating. And if they are such, then they are also transformable, one into the other. Indeed they are empirically transformable, such that in many cases the question “What’s wrong with Jane?” might be answered as follows:

“What’s wrong with Jane is that she’s not spending enough time working on what’s right with her.”

As long as societies are dominated by avaricious economic interests, then the question with which consumers will be constantly bombarded is “What’s wrong with you?” The more that can be found wrong with people, the more remedies can be sold to them.

But if we return to the theme of the School of Athens, and its original title, namely “*Causarum Cognitio*” or Knowledge of Causes, we can underscore exactly what the organizers of this conference have exposed in their strident *Call for Papers*: that the most serious malaises afflicting the developed world today are diseases not of biological origin, but of the very culture itself.

Obesity, anorexia, bulimia, depression, ADHD, autism, ED, other sexual dysfunctions, sleep disorders, stress disorders, chronic fatigue syndromes, social anxiety and other social dysfunctions, have all reached or are reaching epidemic proportions, either in nations wholesale or in significant sectors thereof.

Yet whenever we encounter an epidemic, we need to explicate the epidemiology. Epidemics grounded in biology, typically manifesting as viruses or bacteria, have ravaged human populations. Epidemics of bubonic plague, influenza, typhus, yellow fever, malaria, polio, and HIV have carried away tens and hundreds of millions. Because such illnesses are biologically-based, their containments or cures (where possible) have therefore depended on a precise understanding of their respective epidemiologies. This inevitably boils down to discovering risk-factors and other correlates, and ultimately to identifying precise causes: *Causarum Cognitio*. Only by understanding the true causes can we intervene reliably, mitigating or preventing the undesirable effects.

What about culturally-induced epidemics, such as obesity? What is its epidemiology? Such widespread and insatiable cravings for monstrous portions of unhealthy foods appear to be futile attempts to fill an existential abyss, or a spiritual void. These so-called "comfort foods" are toxic substances, brimming with poly-unsaturated fats, high-fructose sugars, and the like. But obesity itself is not the core illness; rather, is an overt sign of a covert problem. Medical therapies are treating a symptom -- obesity -- of a malaise they cannot diagnose, for it is not biologically-rooted.

People who over-consume "comfort foods" must be experiencing extreme discomforts, acute cases of what Buddhists call "dukkha" -- life's inherent dissatisfactoriness. Some Buddhists call it "the pain of existence." Eating and overeating junk food lends sufferers a palpable, if transitory, sensation of comfort. Yet the dissatisfaction persists, and moreover intensifies, because it is not in the first instance a malaise of the body, but now has become one. Over-ingesting comfort food only exacerbates overall dissatisfaction, enhancing the craving for yet more comfort-food, which worsens the condition.

Everyone bears discomforts in life, just as everyone sooner or later feels the pain of existence. The decisive question is what we do with our discomforts and pains. The so-

called "Educators" on the campus of McDonald's *Hamburger University* are willing and able to inculcate toxic vices in consumers; while philosophical practitioners are willing and able to inculcate virtues in them. Yet ours is also a Sisyphean task. MacDonald's has sold billions of hamburgers; Socratic midwives have not facilitated anything like that number of births of wisdom.

In consequence, obesity is America's -- and increasingly the West's -- leading health problem. Most distressing of all is its prevalence among children, along with life-shortening illnesses such as juvenile diabetes, to which juvenile obesity gives rise. In a healthy society, parents and school systems that poison, sicken, and shorten the life expectancies of their children in this way would be held criminally responsible. It is a measure of the sickness of American society that such harms being inflicted on children are broadly-accepted norms. And beyond this, there are now anti-food-libel laws in place, thanks to the economic and political clout of big agribusiness, such that anyone who exercises their First Amendment right and critiques unhealthy food publicly, whether in a book, on radio or TV, or on the web, risks a major lawsuit calculated to silence the critic and to intimidate other would-be critics.

While a reversal of America's obesity epidemic could be effected by Humanities Therapies -- for example via films such as "Supersize Me", and via more in-depth interventions -- the monetary interests that have made Americans so sick are also capable of making them well, just in case it turns out to be more profitable to do so. American health insurers now view obesity and its corollary illnesses as unjustifiably costly to manage. So they are beginning to "weigh in" on the side of healthy foods, but only because of profit-motive. And in the USA, doing the right thing for the wrong reason can have Kafkaesque consequences for consumers. A friend of mine, who was clinically obese, needed bariatric surgery in order to lose weight. But his health insurance would not pay for the procedure, because he was not obese enough by their measurements. So he had to gain another ten pounds in order to qualify for financial coverage of his weight-loss surgery.



figure 12: Hamburger University

Until and unless Americans are willing to look in the epidemiological mirror, they will not manage to contain or to cure the catalogue of culturally-induced illnesses with which they continue to afflict themselves, along with much of the developed world. A vital challenge for Humanities Therapy is to expose the epidemiology of each and every one of these cultural illnesses, and moreover to demonstrate their containment or cure by co-creating spaces in which sufferers can experience prolonged periods of existence and habit predicated pleasantly on what is right with them (as opposed to experiencing constant reinforcement of what is wrong with them).

The reality is that Americans are somnambulating into the abyss. A recent U.S. Army study concluded that more than 70% of America's young men are unfit for military service, owing to physical or psychological disabilities, or both. What in earth has gone so physically and psychologically wrong with an entire generation of young men? It can only be that their enculturation as human beings has reinforced virtually everything that can go wrong with them, and precious little that can go right with them. For one thing: From cradle to grave, a large majority of them will have watched tens of thousands of hours of television, and eaten thousands of hamburgers, but will not have spent one hour on philosophy, nor will have digested even a single work from philosophy's extensive menu.

If Nietzsche could witness all this, he'd probably remark: "The God-slayers of the marketplace are now slaying their own children." Yet it is possible to experience serenity without appealing an external or anthropomorphized godhead, and Asian humanisms have shown us how.

Asian Humanisms

I have had occasion to mention, albeit en passant, Asia's ancient humanistic traditions. Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism all qualify as humanisms, and they all predate the classical Western humanisms spawned in Hellas, save that Pythagoras was probably a contemporary of Lao Tzu, and Siddhartha Gautama. These three ushered in the Axial Age.

I cannot possibly do justice here to the evolutions of Taoism and Buddhism, but must note in passing that they, along with Stoicism, are secular humanisms that claim strong empirical success in philosophical counseling -- in my view, the three most powerful remedies extant to spiritual bankruptcy among other culturally-induced illnesses. We will look at them more closely in a workshop. They provide strong antidotes to "dukkha," and moreover prescribe practices that conduce to the arising of serenity, mainly through dissolution of the apparent but unreal "self" whose cravings constitute the very origin of suffering.

As I previously asserted, the unifying principles that animate Taoism and Buddhism, respectively, are pervasive throughout every realm of existence that our brains can cognize. Here is a sublime illustration, which came to me as an epiphany during the summer of 2005. Consider a typical representation of Buddhist art, in an Indian style, in

which Buddha is surrounded by bodhisattvas, fauna and flora. Clearly, this painting, along with the dharma it represents, is a creative product of the holistic right brain.



figure 13: right-brain Buddha

Now consider another picture, rooted completely in the left brain. It's a computer-generated image of an important mathematical object that was discovered only in the 1970s, by French mathematician and fractal geometer Benoit Mandelbrot. In his honor, it's called a "Mandelbrot set," and it's the fundamental (and infinitely scalable) object of chaos theory.

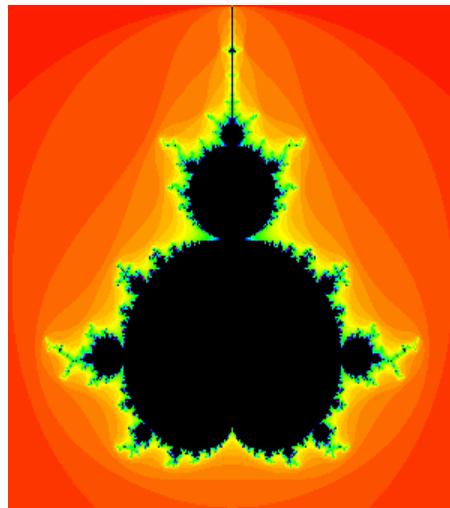


figure 14: Mandelbrot set: left-brain Buddha

In holistic right-brain terms, the practice of secular humanistic Buddhism is an excellent way to find the calm and serene eye of the hurricane of existence, a region of order amidst chaos. In reductionistic left-brain terms, a simple iterated mathematical equation gives rise to an infinitely deep well of chaos, which contains infinite replicas of itself, and

replicas of replicas of itself. We can use computers instrumentally, to peel millions and billions and trillions of layers of this infinite onion of chaos, without making any headway toward its core. Yet we know what lies there: In the eye of that hurricane called chaos, we encounter none other than the fundamental object of chaos itself. And what shape is it? To me, it looks like a fractal Buddha.

I repeat: a Mandelbrot set is nothing other than a fractal Buddha. Or, if you prefer, a Buddha is nothing other than an embodiment of fractal geometry, representing the order at the very heart of chaos, throughout infinite realms of existence. In sum, Buddhism provides a robust unifying principle, able to integrate causally dissociated left-brain and right-brain depictions even of itself.

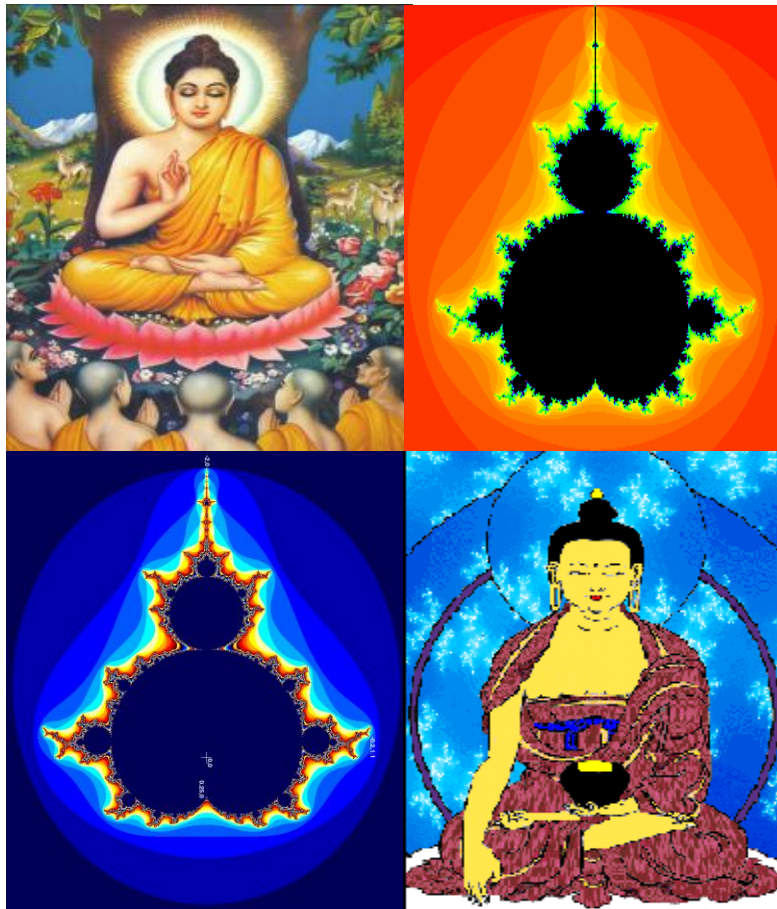


figure 15: Buddha and fractal Buddha

Buddhism is a powerful Asian humanism that speaks universally to human suffering and social chaos, with a clear view to their alleviation. No wonder Buddhism is attracting so many lay practitioners in the West, where it grants them refuge and lasting relief from so many of the culturally-induced illnesses that besiege them daily. Lay Buddhism is most assuredly a humanism, and its practice is a humanities-based therapy. Even its side-effects are beneficial.

The Italian Renaissance Meets Asian Buddhism

We began with the humanism that emerged from the Italian Renaissance. We are ending with the humanism that emerged two thousand years earlier, from Asian Buddhism. Now allow me to employ Buddhism to close that loop, too. Where does the Italian Renaissance meet Asian Buddhism? We find an elegant encounter on a gigantic silkscreen that adorns the stage of the main auditorium of Soka University, in Tokyo.

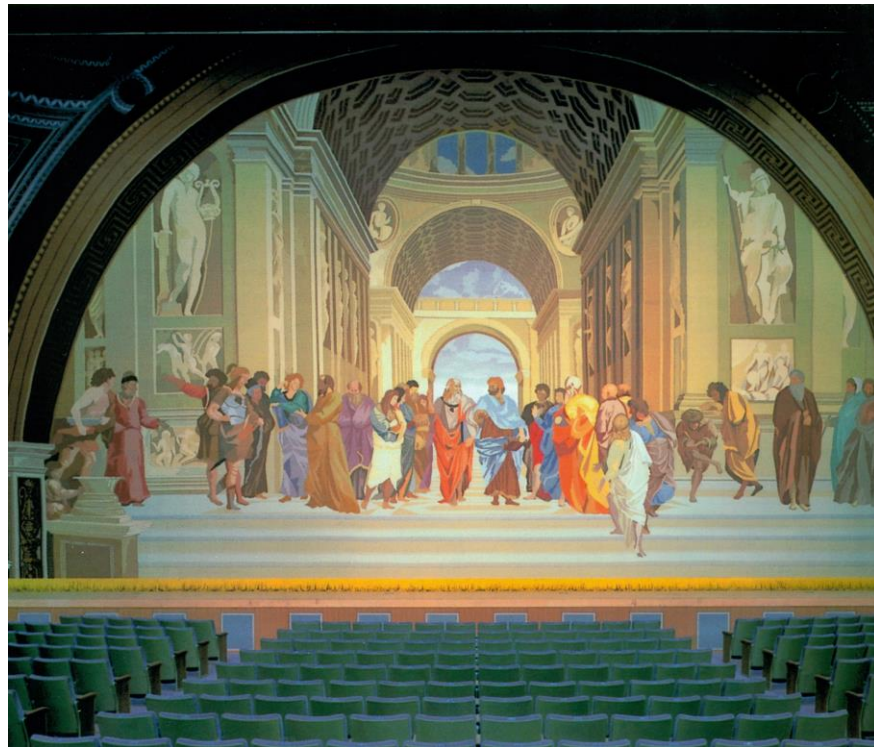


figure 16: School of Athens, silkscreen, Soka University, Tokyo

Remarkably, it's a silkscreen reproduction of none other than Raphael's *School of Athens*. It was commissioned and caused to be placed there by the founder of Soka University, and President of Soka Gakkai International, namely Daisaku Ikeda. Thanks to a dialogue with President Ikeda, which has been published in Japanese and is forthcoming in English,⁷ I was able to ask him why he chose that particular painting. There is surely no shortage of classic Asian art from which he could have drawn.

President Ikeda's answer was in two parts, and both are germane to Humanities Therapy. First, he inquired whether it was accurate to portray Socrates as Plato does in the *Thaetetus*: a midwife to the birth of wisdom in others, wisdom with which we are all pregnant, but whose birthing may require philosophical midwifery. I affirmed that this is a standard account. So President Ikeda observed that the role of the Socratic midwife has a precise analogue in Mahayana Buddhism: namely, one kind of Bodhisattva. His lay Buddhist view of the Socratics, informed by Nichiren's interpretation of the *Lotus Sutra*,

recognizes them (and us) as helpers and therefore Bodhisattvas, notwithstanding the different cultural guises in which they (and we) may appear.

But Raphael's painting also has special significance for Ikeda, just as it has for us. His vision for the 21st century is that a new humanistic renaissance will emerge in the global village, to uplift human aspiration, to alleviate culturally-induced illnesses, and to restore well-being. Like us, President Ikeda is working to re-animate the spirit of this new humanism, to ask "What's right with you?" and to help mobilize that righteous energy. This too is Humanities Therapy.

His placement of that silkscreen may have been a prophecy as well, for it depicts Western philosophers and other humanists standing on an Asian stage. And here we are today, only a few decades after that silkscreen was hung: Western philosophers and other humanists standing on an Asian stage, helping to re-enact a new Renaissance in Humanities.

In conclusion, we stand at the threshold of a fourth phase of humanism, which we can justifiably call "Humanities Therapy." We have seen how the rediscovery and study of classical Humanities during the Italian Renaissance managed (at least temporarily) to reconcile the rift between theology and philosophy. We have seen how this led to Enlightenment humanism, which similarly and temporarily reconciled the rift between theology and science, while at the same time potentiating the paradox that undermined humanism with mechanism and nihilism. We have seen how secular humanisms (such as existentialism) attempted to recover meaning, value, and purpose in an otherwise accidental godless cosmos, only to be eclipsed by behaviorism or deconstructed by postmodernism. And we have seen how post-modern and post-Christian deconstructions have stripped human beings of the final vestiges of their humanity, leaving empty husks to be diagnosed, drugged, fatted, and stupefied by dehumanizing technocracies.

Our collective response is to re-instate humanism as Humanities Therapy, which joins together the best traditions and practices of Western and Asian civilizations alike. Our mission, as of old, is none other than the Bodhisattva way, whether of Socrates, Lao Tzu, or Buddha. We must venture into Plato's Cave, and unfetter those who are chained to its bleak walls, daily diagnosed and drugged, taught to wallow in culturally-fabricated dysfunctions, subsisting in ignorance of their humanity and its marvelous potential.

We are not here to deny what science can affirm, but to affirm what science cannot deny: To be fully human, we must experience the Humanities themselves. The challenge for Humanities Therapists is both urgent, and global. In whatever sphere you work, your efforts are of paramount importance in helping restore appreciation of the gift of being born human. A human life is neither a disease, nor a curse, nor an accident. It is a precious opportunity for the flourishing of sentience, and the creation of value. Let us therefore redouble our efforts to help humanity flourish, and to restore well-being in a world blinded by delusion and poisoned by disenchantment. We are in the vanguard of a new Renaissance in Humanities: an auspicious time and place to take momentous steps.

Notes

¹ <http://www.ibiblio.org/expo/vatican.exhibit/exhibit/c-humanism/Humanism.html>

² <http://www.ibiblio.org/expo/vatican.exhibit/exhibit/c-humanism/Humanism.html>

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Two_Cultures#cite_note-Nature-9

⁴ See e.g. A. Tucker 2012. Bully U: Central Planning and Higher Education. *The Independent Review*, Volume 17, No.1, Summer 2012, 99-119.

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humanities#cite_note-33

⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Two_Cultures#cite_note-Nature-9

⁷ Daisaku kdeda and Lou Marinoff 2012. *The Inner Philosopher: Conversations on Philosophy's Transformative Power*. Cambridge, MA: Dialogue Path Press.