



# The Ends of the Humanities

**Perspectives from the Humanities and Social Sciences**

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**The Humanities as an Act of Faith**  
**Integral Human Development as Challenge to the “Culture of Irony”**

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The Ends of Humanities - Volume 1: The Ends of the Humanities  
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Melusina Press 2021

Published in **Melusina Press**, 2021  
11, Porte des Sciences  
L-4366 Esch-sur-Alzette  
<https://www.melusinapress.lu>

Management: Niels-Oliver Walkowski, Johannes Pause  
Copyediting: Carolyn Knaup, Niels-Oliver Walkowski  
Cover and Layout: Valentin Henning, Erik Seitz

The digital version of this publication is freely available at  
<https://www.melusinapress.lu>.

The PDF and the master copy are generated with the help of princeXML.  
Print and Distribution is carried out by BoD - Books on Demand, Norderstedt

Bibliographic information of the National Library of Luxembourg: The National Library of Luxembourg lists this publication in the Luxembourg National Bibliography; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at [bnl.public.lu](http://bnl.public.lu).

ISBN (Online): 978-2-919815-24-1  
DOI (Publication): 10.26298/melusina.724f-cv52  
DOI (Volume): 10.26298/melusina.qmp0-vm61  
DOI (Series): 10.26298/2716-7550  
ISSN (Online): 2716-7550

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# Introduction

For Jim Mayzik, S. J.

“For the Jewish scriptures, you cannot manufacture images of God or even give him a name, because the only image of God is humanity. And humanity is equally resistant to definition.” Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*<sup>1</sup>

The obvious double entendre implicit in the conference title *The Ends of the Humanities* challenges us both to think of the purpose (telos) of the humanities and to contemplate their demise. Intriguingly, the challenge is pluralized from the outset (ends not end), urging us to adopt broader, more inclusive and capacious categories of analysis—recommending, in other words, what one might well call a “catholic” approach. I come to these questions—ones that are existential both for my line of work and for the entire swath of higher education known in the United States as the “liberal arts college” curriculum<sup>2</sup>--from two rather specific perspectives, with the hope, however, that they may shed light on broader issues in the humanities: First, I am a scholar of literature and film (and will accordingly draw most of my examples from these fields). Second, and equally important, I am the product of Jesuit higher education, and have absorbed (perhaps even before I was fully aware of it) the Ignatian model of holistic pedagogy

1 Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), p. 145.

2 I think this remains somewhat of a mystery to many Europeans, who sometimes dismiss the U.S. liberal arts college curriculum as a belated form of the humanistic *Gymnasium*, or refer to it quizzically as a mere “studium generale.” One of the most thoughtful treatments of the liberal arts that I know of can be found in Robert J. Thompson’s *Beyond Reason and Tolerance: The Purpose and Practice of Higher Education* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014; see especially c. 7, “Providing a Formative Undergraduate Liberal Education (pp. 147-72). A more philosophical explication of humanistic studies is to be found in Helen Small’s *The Value of the Humanities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). For a broader, institutional perspective, see Victor E. Ferrall’s indispensable *Liberal Arts at the Brink* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011). Ferrall shows, among other things, that many nominal liberal arts colleges have transformed themselves into purveyors of vocational education. To understand the landscape of U.S. higher education--the crucial context for discussing the future of the humanities--consult John V. Lombardi’s very readable and instructive *How Universities Work* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013) as well as Richard P. Keeling and Richard H. Hersh’s *We’re Losing Our Minds: Rethinking American Higher Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). While the latter may seem alarmist in their rhetoric, the authors actually proved to be quite prescient, at least with regard to the humanities. Today, one reads on an almost daily basis an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* regarding the crisis of the humanities. See, for example, Beth McMurtie, “Can You Get Students Interested in the Humanities Again? These Colleges May Have Figured It Out”: <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Can-You-Get-Students/247482?cid=db&source=ams&sourceId=4434674>. On the cuts to liberal arts/humanities programs, see for example: Liam Knox, “University of Tulsa’s Faculty to Ask Oklahoma’s Attorney General to Halt Controversial Restructuring Plan,”: <https://www.chronicle.com/article/U-of-Tulsa-Faculty-to-Ask/246997?cid=db&source=ams&sourceId=4434674>. The most egregious loss to date for the humanities has very likely been in the area of foreign language and culture programs; see Steven Johnson, “Colleges Lose a ‘Stunning’ 651 Foreign-Language Programs in 3 Years”: <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Colleges-Lose-a-Stunning-/245526>. The COVID-19 pandemic has only intensified the crisis.

that takes seriously the dignity and integrity of the individual, as well as the individual's deep connections to larger communities.<sup>3</sup> I am, like all my colleagues, deeply embedded in (and to some extent the product of) the humanities--long before I reflect upon them.

This essay is not an attempt to account for the long history of Catholic humanism, beginning with Erasmus, or to reflect upon the broad philosophical convergence of Catholic thought and the humanities. That work has been done elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> My project is more personal and pragmatic. I seek in this essay to make clear to myself and to the reader the ways in which a key strand of contemporary Catholic social teaching can—under certain institutional circumstances—sustain and promote the humanities. My starting point, while biographically motivated (and in that sense consistent), may to others seem counter-intuitive. For I draw my inspiration from a plank of Catholic social teaching (IHD) that was first intended for something quite different, namely the world of policy implementation (aiding the development of radically under-resourced peoples), and thus ostensibly more closely affiliated with the social sciences. Yet it is this apparent misalignment that interests me, because “integral human development” is fundamentally an integrative enterprise that presumes a rich interdisciplinary dialogue and interdependence among the traditional humanities, social, and natural sciences.

Thus the very thing that makes IHD at first glance appear to be a misfit, turns out, in my view, to be its greatest strength. For the survival of the humanities in higher education will not be in isolation from, but rather in meaningful dialogue with, the dominant scientific and social-scientific research paradigms. A second advantage in taking this approach is that IHD exemplifies in many ways what is best and most accessible in contemporary Catholic thought. Even dyed-in-the-wool secularists are frequently moved by Pope Francis's unceasing exhortation to care for the environment and to promote the welfare of all immigrants--whether legal or not. Abstruse philosophical arguments about the “unity of knowledge” (meant to show how Catholic precepts enhance the pursuit of integrated knowledge) have their place, to be sure. But they leave many cold, whereas Francis's forceful advocacy of social and ecological justice, as is evident in Wim Wenders' 2017 film *Papst Franziskus: Ein Mann seines Wortes*, is palpable, widely admired, and explicitly rooted in IHD.<sup>5</sup>

In explaining how IHD can nourish the humanities, my goals are frankly limited: IHD is not directly applicable to all or even most settings in higher education, nor can it on its own save us from a further decline. Neither does it provide that elusive, final philosophical grounding to support the sometimes tenuous latticework of humanities

3 My initiation to Ignatian pedagogy began at Georgetown University, where I had the good fortune to study under Monika Hellwig, Joseph Zrinyi, SJ; Robert Lawton, SJ; and Paul Cioffi, SJ. But it owes even more to the five years I spent as a teacher at the Jesuit high school, St. Peter's Preparatory (Jersey City, New Jersey, USA). I am forever grateful to those colleagues--Jesuit and lay--for this gift. I thank Jack Raslowsky, Joseph Parkes, SJ; Paul Harrison, SJ; Joseph Wuss, SJ; John Mullen, SJ; and Tony Azarto, SJ. But I am particularly indebted to Fr. Jim Mayzik, S.J., to whom I owe more than I can possibly say and to whom I dedicate this essay.

4 For a brief and cogent discussion, see Mark W. Roche, *The Intellectual Appeal of Catholicism and the Idea of a Catholic University* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), which also contains other useful sources.

5 <https://www.wim-wenders.com/event/papst-franziskus-ein-mann-seines-wortes/>

curricula. Rather, it provides a coherent accounting of values and postulates that are congruent with and supportive of an inclusive, richly textured, solidarity-based conception of the humanities. If the link I establish between IHD and the humanities below (drawing in this case upon on a recent re-conceptualization of literary and cultural studies) is at all compelling, it may lead readers to ask if there are analogous sources in their own traditions—religious or secular—that can sponsor a similar, more holistic and inclusive approach. In this sense, my contribution might spur further articulation of what at bottom is a faith position, namely that we must first posit a rich, rhizomatic view of the individual before—and as—we promote the humanities. We have a stake in the humanities, and are forever mirroring ourselves in the objects of our study. Whether a blessing or a curse—and it is probably both by turns--this is our starting point.

This essay consists of two parts. For those eager to explore the IHD/humanities connection, the first part may seem like an extended and possibly annoying *Verzögerungselement* (retarding narrative element); those readers should feel free to skip to part two. The first part (with four brief subsections) consists of a series of reflections on roadblocks that in many cases we in the academy have placed in the way of the humanities. It seems sensible to me to attempt to first clear the way of these needless and sometimes self-inflicted handicaps before embarking on the case for an IHD-inspired humanities.

## **Part I: Self-Inflicted Wounds**

### *A. The Humanities in Retreat: Undermining Ourselves.*

Much has been written about the dismal state of the humanities, but to me the most striking phenomenon has been to watch colleagues flee the disciplinary designation, eschewing the humanities moniker. At Duke University, where I taught for ten years, the History Department insisted on seeing itself as a social science—as it is in fact categorized at a number of other institutions of higher education in the United States. And Philosophy had just voted to leave the Humanities faculty as well. The motive was not simply an honest self-assessment, or an impulse to tidy up administrative units, I would argue. Rather, there is a pervasive sense that the humanities are simply less “scientific,” and thus less true and relevant. It is another way of expressing the derogatory distinction between the allegedly “soft” humanities and the “hard” sciences. This seems to me to be a worthwhile starting point, because it compels us to ask to what extent the professoriate is itself undermining the humanities. We tend to begin the discussion with the larger philosophical challenges to the viability of traditional humanistic study and then move to economic factors (most recently, the crash of 2008) and interest groups (parents concerned about their student-children getting decent jobs post-graduation) in our effort to understand the crisis. But it behooves us, I think, to inquire into our own ranks as well, because a number of other constituencies (university leaders, parents, students, and donors, for example) sometimes take their cue from us.

For ten years I taught at Rutgers University—a large and distinguished state university—where the Dean of Arts and Sciences held large monthly department chair meetings. Almost every meeting revealed rifts between the two faculties, as well as the clearly

subordinate status of the humanities. This is not to say that scientists do not value humanistic inquiry. But for many, I contend, it is a luxury, a hobby, an indulgence that is not on par with their research. And humanities faculty have themselves—hewing to the regnant plausibility structures of contemporary higher education and research—begun using the language of science to justify themselves and their endeavors. One thinks, for example, of the vaunted “humanities labs” at Duke, that seem (to me at least) to appropriate prestige from the nomenclature and practice of the natural sciences. To be sure, there is a deficit of self esteem—I am tempted to say, an inferiority complex—on the side of humanists to be contended with. All of which is to say that the professoriate is itself riven with doubt about the humanities; we inhabit a house sometimes quite virulently divided against itself, and are in this sense a symptom (rather than the staunch resisters some have imagined) of the crisis itself.

*B. The “ontological argument” for the humanities: a negative definition with limited merit.*

Louis Menand at Harvard is just one of the eminent proponents of the idea that the value of the humanities is rooted in its existential opposition to capitalist culture.<sup>6</sup> As an enterprise without intrinsic economic value, a set of practices that resist commodification and instrumentalization for economic ends, the humanities offer an essential moment of resistance to the prevailing winds of consumer culture. Irreducible to mere utilitarian measures, the humanities constitute an oasis—perhaps a real ivory tower—that alone allows for calm reflection outside the perilous swirl of worldly events. In this view, the humanities incorporate the ideal of the university itself to stand above and apart from the quotidian forces of politics and economic competition. Unlike some scientific research that may for example be corrupted by military or corporate contracts, the humanities operate in a realm incommensurate with cost-benefit considerations—simply by being what they are. They are *eo ipso* incommensurate with capitalist culture, and thus function—from this ideal perspective—in a way Adorno imagined modern art does, namely as that residual site that refuses cooptation, that kernel of resistance that proves “indigestible” to the appetites of sprawling, unfettered capital.

Well and good, as far as it goes. This is not the place to pursue in detail potential logical contradictions. For example, when defended on these grounds, even a totally “disinterested” humanities (in line with the Kantian conception of art) contains within itself a kind of instrumental, utilitarian telos—namely to contest the larger hegemonic structures of social meaning. In the very act of saying “no” to the prevailing logic of capital-

6 On this, see William Collins Donahue and Martin Kagel, “An Immodest Proposal: Reenvisioning German Studies through European Integration.” In: *Taking Stock of German Studies in the United States: The New Millennium*, eds. Carol Anne Costabile-Hemming and Rachel Halverson (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2015): 272-89. Long before Menand, Terry Eagleton articulated this contestatory view of the humanities thus: “Because subjects like literature and art history have no obvious material pay-off, they tend to attract those who look askance at capitalist notions of utility. The idea of doing something purely for the delight of it has always rattled the grey-bearded guardians of the state. Sheer pointlessness is a deeply subversive affair.” In Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), p. 39; see also p. 97. This argument has been forcefully made by Thomas Docherty in *Aesthetic Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); see also Rita Felski’s refutation of Docherty in her *Uses of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), pp. 5-6.



ism, it assumes a specific socio-political function, thereby becoming part of a dialectic, rather than retaining an unadulterated “outsider” status. Let us assume, however, that there is some truth to this proposition. I do. The danger, as I see it, is to allow this to become our *principal* justification. The weakness is the self-congratulatory moment attending this claim. For on this argument, it matters little *what* we pursue; rather the value of the humanistic disciplines becomes abstracted to what I would call a “thin,” universal, negative function (i.e. contesting something else), rather than justified on the basis of specific efforts of historical, philosophical, or aesthetic inquiry. Our value is fiat, and becomes axiomatic. We are valuable because we are.

There are three additional problems with this argument, if advanced in this assertive manner: First, it fails to generate assessment criteria. Should we do more or less? Of what precisely? Why? The ontological argument only tells us *that* we should do the humanities; it doesn’t say much about the *how*, or how to resolve competing claims within the humanities. Second, in its (really almost too convenient) self-validating form, it provides little motivation to enter the fray of university politics. Much of university administration has to do with resource allocation. If we rely too heavily on the *a priori* argument for the humanities, we may be tempted to remove ourselves from the tussle of negotiations over scarce funding. This would be tantamount to unilateral disarmament *vis-à-vis* the non-humanistic disciplines. Third, the ontological argument, as I am calling it, is simply not one that is generally well understood or widely accepted outside the academy. For example, real political activists will find its core notion of “protest” to be far too abstract and weak, while others will find its central claim to be amusing at best, and simply unprovable at worst. This fact alone severely limits its usefulness.

*C. Postmodernism’s unacknowledged faith position: a thin accounting of the human subject*

The third factor that needs to be acknowledged—even if it cannot be fully documented here—is the extent to which humanists have undermined themselves by means of nomenclature, practice, and methodology. Three trends can be briefly identified here. When I was a graduate student in the 1990s—in the field of German literature as well as literary studies more generally—it was *de rigueur* to speak of the humanities pejoratively; what was then all the rage was the notion of the “post-human.” There was of course a valid point to this critique, which was meant to reveal heretofore unacknowledged regressive assumptions about what constitutes “human nature.” A slew of racist, sexist, and other biases were rightly exposed and held up to ridicule; but to some extent we threw the baby out with the bathwater. One could at best speak of “humanism” in a very delimited, historical sense; but not in any normative or positive sense that would apply to the present day. That legacy is with us still, I fear.<sup>7</sup>

Relatedly, the notion of the postmodern, with its dismissal of all “master narratives,” and its bold truth claim about the impossibility of truth, did its part to undermine our

7 Posthumanism is of course itself a complex affair rivaling the terminological difficulties surrounding humanism and the humanities. For a now classic discussion of the term in light of digital technology and artificial intelligence, see Katherine Hayles’ *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

enterprise. The humanities do in the end require notions of the human—no matter how provisional, historicized, or evolving these may prove to be. But postmodernism’s insistently antifoundational doctrine—widely embraced by the academic humanities—appeared to be in conflict with this fundamental requirement.

In her wide-ranging 2018 study, *The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump*, Michiko Kakutani lays significant blame at the feet of academics. Her charge is not just that we have purveyed nihilistic and cynical views about the possibility of truth-telling; she is critical also of the reductive view of the human being implicit in deconstruction, one of the dominant literary-critical paradigms of the last quarter century. Aware that demagogues make illicit use of academic theory, Kakutani nevertheless identifies scholars themselves as responsible for a very one-sided, constricted view of the human being:

Some [internet] trolls have employed relativistic arguments to insist that their promotion of alternative facts is simply adding a voice to the conversation, that there are no more objective *truths* anymore--only different perceptions and different story lines. They are clearly using postmodernist arguments in bad faith, but their assertions are no more disingenuous, really, than the efforts of Paul de Man’s defenders to explain away his anti-Semitism by using deconstruction to argue that the articles he wrote for a pro-Nazi publication in the 1940s didn’t really mean what they appear to mean.

Deconstruction, in fact, is deeply nihilistic, implying that the efforts of journalists and historians--to ascertain the best available truths through the careful gathering and weighing of evidence--are futile. It suggests that reason is an outdated value, that language is not a tool for communication but an unstable and deceptive interface that is constantly subverting itself. . . and many postmodernists go so far as to suggest that the idea of individual responsibility is overrated, as the scholar Christopher Butler puts it, for promoting a “far too novelistic and bourgeois belief in the importance of individual human agency in preference to an attribution to underlying economic structures.” (160-61)

Kakutani intensifies her scrutiny of this jaundiced view of language and human subjectivity by invoking David Foster Wallace’s critique of postmodernism:

Its promulgation of cynicism made writers wary of sincerity and “retro-values like originality, depth, integrity,” he wrote; it shielded “the heaper of scorn from scorn” while congratulating “the patron of scorn for rising above the mass of people who still fall for outmoded pretensions.” (162)<sup>8</sup>

8 For further discussion of postmodernism’s contribution to the degradation of civil discourse, see Kakutani, pp. 47-8; 54-5; 56-60; 73-75; 147-49. Postmodernism is not just one among many targets, but rather a principal theme that runs throughout the book.

This critique is not original with Kakutani; these arguments have been around for several decades, as she acknowledges. The force of her study, which is self-consciously synthetic, emerges from her wide reading and erudition. What is new in *The Death of Truth* is the author's direct indictment of academic humanists for fueling--perhaps inadvertently--a broader culture of skepticism as well as a reductive view of what it means to be human: "The migration of postmodern ideas from academia to the political mainstream is a reminder of how the culture wars--as the vociferous debates over race, religion, gender, and school curricula were called during the 1980s and 1990s--have mutated in unexpected ways" (49).

In several of her cases, Kakutani is able to show how propagandists like Steve Bannon and Vladislav Surkov make fairly direct use of deconstruction and postmodernist theory to undermine the concept of truth. For her, it matters little whether or not they do so in "bad faith," because in any case postmodernists will have some responsibility to shoulder. She is of course not alone. Intellectual historian James T. Kloppenberg diagnoses a similar kind of corrosive skepticism that established itself as a dominant epistemological paradigm. Reflecting on one of his most popular courses at Harvard University, he writes:

"A central theme of the course was the rise—and perhaps, after 9/11, the fall—of what was frequently called 'the culture of irony,' the late twentieth century's postmodern skepticism about dogmas and distrust of eternal truths. In my lectures I emphasized the ways in which the founders of the American philosophy of pragmatism a century earlier had disclosed the contingency of ideas while continuing to embrace the ideals of democracy. The challenge of the twenty-first century, the challenge facing this generation of students, was to construct from the ashes left by the culture of irony, which seemed to disintegrate with the Twin Towers, their own democratic ideals."<sup>9</sup> Academics surely have some responsibility for those ashes.

No matter how august her company, however, one can argue that Kakutani has somewhat over-indicted academics, or at least overestimated our influence on the larger culture. I think she has. Surely other factors, some of greater social consequence, need to be considered.<sup>10</sup> But the evidence she gathers is enough, in my judgment, to give us

9 James T. Kloppenberg, "Reading Buttigieg: A Former Teacher's Perspective," *Commonweal*, February 18, 2020:

10 At the very least, a multifactorial approach is called for, and this would require a study of its own. Susan Neiman, for example, casts a much broader (and to my mind more convincing) net when she indicts neoliberalism, biological determinism, as well as "post-structuralist assumptions about power" (*Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019, pp. 57, 167, 246, 304, 359, 378-84; here: 378). In a manner that intersects with Neiman's analysis of the AfD's use of Facebook, the documentary *Social Dilemma* indicts core practices of social media for undermining truth claims of all kinds (dir. Jeff Orlowski, 2020). The role of more traditional media outlets also deserves particular attention. A stark example is provided by the Russian Channel One, but similar strategies of relativization and obfuscation can be identified in US media outlets like Fox News. Regarding Channel One, *New Yorker* writer Joshua Yaffa writes: "Rather than denying any specific facts or allegations against the regime, its news shows air conspiracy theories, contradictory interpretations of facts, and doctored footage to sow confusion. So, even though Russians have independent media outlets and access to the Internet, Channel One perpetuates a feeling that that the truth can never be known, one interpretation is as good as another, and there is no objective basis to critique

serious pause. We are asked not only to consider our role in the “death of truth,” but just as important, to reevaluate the shrunken view of the self that postmodernism purveys. For if we allow that to go unchecked, we will have given up a richer view of the humanities. Finally, we will need to address postmodernism’s fundamental asymmetry, whereby the critic, as wielder of “rigorous theory,” somehow retains a powerful sense of agency that is denied the rest of humankind. Each of these three points will be addressed in a counter-model proposed by Toril Moi below.

The case against postmodernist theory has been building for almost twenty years. A turning point was surely Terry Eagleton’s 2003 *After Theory*, in part because it was Eagleton’s bestselling 1983 primer, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, that initiated generations of college students into the study of literary and cultural theory in the first place. Now the master builder was questioning the foundations of his own edifice. But *After Theory* does not, upon careful reading, actually revoke or annul the real contributions of theory. In fact, Eagleton asserts, “Most of the objections to theory are either false or fairly trifling.”<sup>11</sup> Postmodernism is notoriously wary of norms and universals, and this wariness has redounded to the benefit of marginalized groups and minorities, and helped bring about an awareness of prejudices secreted within majority group assumptions.<sup>12</sup>

It is only at the point when postmodernism absolutizes its own methods that it becomes vulnerable to stinging critique. Eagleton is more concerned to distinguish between historically contingent norms--which may be tendentious symptoms of class interest and thus ideology--from the philosophical category of the normative. The former is fair game for critique; the latter is a necessity precisely for the kind of social change radicals hope to bring about. And the same is true for “universals”: particular, historically-contingent articulations may well be deemed oppressive, and thus deservedly assailable. But the philosophical category itself cannot be abolished without undermining the very emancipatory efforts that identify and seek to eradicate oppression in the first place. Finally, Eagleton--and here he is in full agreement with Kakutani--laments the diminution and depletion of human subjectivity implicit in much postmodernist theory. A major point in his study is that the reduced self posited by postmodernism is not only untrue to our experience, but is also one that is incapable of mounting meaningful

what Russia gets from its leaders.” See the *New Yorker Radio Hour* podcast “How Channel One Keeps the News Safe for Putin,” December 9, 2019: <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/tnyradiohour/segments/how-channel-one-keeps-news-safe-putin>

11 *After Theory*, p. 101.

12 Eagleton defines postmodernism as “the contemporary movement of thought which rejects totalities, universal values, grand historical narratives, solid foundations to human existence and the possibility of objective knowledge. Postmodernism is sceptical of truth, unity and progress, opposes what it sees as elitism in culture, tends toward cultural relativism, and celebrates pluralism, discontinuity and heterogeneity” (*After Theory*, p. 13).

protest, let alone revolution;<sup>13</sup> theory in this way becomes an unwitting apologist for the status quo. “With postmodernism,” he writes,

the will turns back upon itself and colonizes the strenuously willing subject itself. It gives birth to a human being every bit as protean and diffuse as the society around it. The creature who emerges from postmodern thought is centreless, hedonistic, self-inventing, ceaselessly adaptive. He thus fares splendidly in the disco or supermarket, though not quite so well in the school, courtroom or chapel. He sounds more like a Los Angeles media executive than an Indonesian fisherman. Postmodernists oppose universality, and well they might: nothing is more parochial than the kind of human being they admire. It is as though we must now sacrifice our identity to our freedom, which leaves open the question of who is left to exercise that freedom.<sup>14</sup>

Ultimately it is the “thinning” of the conception of what it means to be human that seems to offend him most:

Cultural theory as we have it promises to grapple with some fundamental problems, but on the whole fails to deliver. It has been shamefaced about morality and metaphysics, embarrassed about love, biology, religion and revolution, largely silent about evil, reticent about death and suffering, dogmatic about essences, universals and foundations, and superficial about truth, objectivity and disinterestedness. This, on any estimate, is rather a large slice of human existence to fall down on. It is also . . . rather an awkward moment in history to find oneself with little or nothing to say about such fundamental questions.<sup>15</sup>

Ignoring--or paying too little attention to--this “large slice of human existence” is essential to my argument about the humanities. Colleagues may disagree vehemently about the extent of postmodernist theory’s complicity in this reductive view; there will be plenty of justifications, many foreseen by Eagleton himself.<sup>16</sup> But entirely to overlook

13 That postmodernism militates against a self robust enough to act in solidarity with others in order then to mount effective protest and bring about societal change is one of Eagleton’s chief criticisms, aptly summarized in this remark: “[solidarity] is beyond the comprehension of a good deal of contemporary cultural theory, for which solidarity means tepid consensus or baleful conformism rather than a source of value and fulfilment” (*After Theory*, 173).

14 *After Theory*, p. 190. In another key passage on the truncated postmodernist view of the human subject, Eagleton writes: “Postmodernism likewise dissolves away constraints, but it breaks the deathly circuit of nihilism and voluntarism by liquefying the will as well. The autonomous self is dismantled, as freedom is detached from the dominative will and relocated in the play of desire” (219).

15 *After Theory*, pp. 101-02. Eagleton explores some of these neglected areas, including religion, morality, metaphysics and transcendence, in his newest book, *Radical Sacrifice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

16 This is obviously a point of contention about which books have been written. So this brief excursus cannot possibly do justice to the topic. I would note, however, that while Eagleton’s conclusions are largely consonant with Kakutani’s, their respective approach is markedly different. Eagleton is pointing out theory’s accomplishments, claims, and limitations--what he calls its “Gains and Losses” (74-102)--in order to identify those areas of human experience that are ignored, neglected, denied, or simplified.

our part in this--whether that be passive or active--would be to miss an opportunity to support a broader, richer, and more viable view of the humanities.

To embrace a prior faith in the humanities, as I recommend here, means an openness to all the areas of human experience that Eagleton sees as poorly served by postmodernism—and perhaps then some. In this sense, it is a normative, universal claim about potential human experiences. But that does not make it ipso facto oppressive or benighted.<sup>17</sup> It should also be remembered that postmodernism, which itself postulates universalist claims (making itself culpable of a classic “performative contradiction”), is as we have seen implicitly proposing its own model of the human and of the humanities. Why should we opt for the reductive one when, by its own accounting, postmodernism explicitly eschews any such truth claim?

*D. The paradoxical nature of the humanities: both conservative and presentist.*

In using the term conservative, I do not of course mean an allegiance to a conservative political program, but refer rather to the fact that at the root of much of what we do is a concern to discover, rediscover, and “conserve” elements of the past. It goes without saying that we do so in a critical spirit and with the optics of contemporary scholarship and the perspectives of our current situation. We don’t, in other words, ever have the completed answer, safely preserved once and for all in the amber of classical texts. Seeking resources in the storehouse of past cultural production doesn’t mean that we blindly affirm a misogynist (or otherwise problematic) canon. On the contrary, it can take the form—as much of the work of Anglo-American feminists has shown—of rescuing useful sources from oblivion. Conserving a cultural legacy may be necessary to re-fashioning and even rejecting it (or parts thereof), for one has to know precisely, as Brecht insisted, what one is saying “no” to.<sup>18</sup> We don’t need to be historians, classicists, or archeologists to see that we are all in some sense “critical conservationists.”

His analysis of postmodernism--coming as it does from an insider--is richer and more substantive than Kakutani’s. Kakutani furthermore makes much broader claims than Eagleton, arguing rather directly for a social influence within popular culture that is in the end more asserted than proven. What I miss in her approach is the historian’s careful sifting of multiple cultural discourses with the goal of establishing whether one can really speak so confidently of academic theory determining popular notions of truth and relativism. A few sensational, newsworthy instances raise concern, to be sure; but they do not quite make the case. It may also be rather egotistical to believe that academics have that much influence on popular culture; if it is true, that influence would seem to be highly selective and uneven. For a more plausible culprit in the matter of “The Death of Truth,” I find Peter Pomerantsev’s essay on propaganda and the internet, “The Info War of All Against All” (*New York Review of Books*, August 23, 2019) more convincing, or at least an important piece to be considered as part of the causal mosaic: [https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/08/23/the-info-war-of-all-against-all/?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=NYR%20Daily%20Peter%20Pomerantsev&utm\\_content=NYR%20Daily%20Peter%20Pomerantsev+CID\\_6c98f45ef83de1a8d9113a0a80b94b93&utm\\_source=Newsletter&utm\\_term=The%20Info%20War%20of%20All%20Against%20All](https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/08/23/the-info-war-of-all-against-all/?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=NYR%20Daily%20Peter%20Pomerantsev&utm_content=NYR%20Daily%20Peter%20Pomerantsev+CID_6c98f45ef83de1a8d9113a0a80b94b93&utm_source=Newsletter&utm_term=The%20Info%20War%20of%20All%20Against%20All)

17 On the inevitability of norms and universals, and their multivalent character (e.g. enabling language and analysis on the one hand, and normalizing prejudice on the other), see *After Theory*, pp. 14-15, where Eagleton quips: “Only an intellectual who has overdosed on abstraction could be dim enough to imagine that whatever bends a norm is politically radical. . . Those who oppose norms, authority and majorities as such are abstract universalists, even though most of them oppose abstract universalism as well.”

18 On this, see David Constantine’s excellent essay, “The Poet, the Reader, and the Citizen,” *The 2004 Craig Lecture, Rutgers German Studies Occasional Papers No. 6* (2006).

But to put it this way is objectionable to some humanists. It is anathema in some circles to confess our investment in the past, in traditions of various kinds—despite the fact that we have expended great energy in acquiring sometimes rather arcane linguistic and historical knowledge necessary to our work. Our failure to embrace the conservative character of the humanities has to do, I would wager, with our fear of being branded traditionalist, quietistic, or reactionary. We understandably want to be seen as—and to actually be—engaged with cutting-edge problems in contemporary society. Our problem with the moniker may have to do, as Thomas Pfau has argued, that we have (at least in the area of German Studies) imbibed the rather “thin” notion of tradition purveyed by Jürgen Habermas, who tends toward a wholesale denigration of the term.<sup>19</sup> Habermas’s negative conception is essentially a response to Nazism, and is itself a symptom of postwar debates, a kind of philosophical *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* that may not stand the test of time. But our (sometimes unthinking) adherence to this position deprives us of the much richer view of tradition, as Pfau argues, proffered by Gadamer, who in fact provides a better philosophical foundation for the practice of the humanities. To acknowledge our investments in the past is not to be backward-looking, antiquarian, or tradition-bound. It can, in fact, be liberating precisely because it helps us understand the way (or one way) in which we fundamentally differ from the sciences.

Presentism—the bane of historians—is of course a loaded word. It suggests a partisan, polemical, and highly selective narrative of the past, frequently deployed to baptize a present-day social arrangement. Here I simply mean that we must keep an eye on the contemporary import of our work, no matter what era it may be affiliated with. And we must be ready to articulate its relevance and perhaps even its urgency to our own day. Presentism in the sense I am using it also means a concern for the undergraduates sitting in front of us in the present moment. James Simpson reminds us of the importance of this clientele. When asked what they find important, particularly in the context of choosing a major, they typically cite not only intellectual curiosity, but the wish to “make a difference in the world, and to contribute to society.”<sup>20</sup> Can we respond to their aspirations as humanists? Can we do so without pandering, without offering a cheap kind of presentism, or pretending that we can offer policy solutions to contemporary problems? Simpson says we can, and I think he is right. We can insist on careful philological training, rigorous source criticism, and thoughtful application of theory—all the things we hold dear—even as we make explicit our dual loyalties to the past and present. The latter is in any case incontrovertible. As Simpson puts it, “The terms of our inquiry are already given to us by our position in history.” Acknowledging that position, and exploiting that in the classroom can make a difference. Presentism—the good kind I am advocating here—is thus a matter both of disciplinary introspection and pragmatics.<sup>21</sup>

19 Thomas Pfau, “The Habermas-Gadamer Debate,” University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill Center for the Humanities. February 2015. As yet unpublished lecture.

20 James Simpson, “Concentrate on the Concentrators; Address the Dean,” delivered at the conference on “The Humanities in the Undergraduate Curriculum,” Duke University, January 30, 2015.

21 This is something we in German Studies have had to learn, for we were in crisis long before the humanities were (at least with respect to the most recent iteration). In the United States, scholars of my gener-

## Part II: Integral Human Development (IHD) as platform for interdisciplinary humanities

### A. Overview

The paradox at the core of the humanities is that we must value and advocate a subject that is by definition elusive, evolving, and contested—a phenomenon Gregory Baum termed “Man Becoming” in his 1971 study of that very title.<sup>22</sup> Yet the humanities always imply a substantial prior commitment of some kind. There is no Archimedean perch from which to observe the human condition; and in this sense we are all “participant observers,” trapped, if you will, in an unending conversation about ourselves, the determinants of our behavior, the possibilities for evolution and growth.

Our challenge is to balance that commitment with an openness to critique.<sup>23</sup> The epistemological con-fusion of the humanities (in which observer and observed are bound relationally in a manner fundamentally irrelevant to the conduct of the natural sciences) necessitates what I have called a faith position, and simultaneously poses a challenge utterly alien to the practice of scientific research. This means that even as we seek to discover, contest, or revise our views of what it means to be human, we acknowledge that we bring with us strong, prior notions, including in my case a commitment to “integral human flourishing” (see below). For example, the misogyny of Baum’s title was hardly noticed when it was published over fifty years ago; today the concept would, by his own evolutionary standards, read something like, “Human Person Becoming.” Affirming what is simultaneously subjected to ongoing rigorous scrutiny may seem to the inveterate skeptic a base contradiction; to the IHD humanist it is a rich paradox.

In his reflection on the role of the humanities in undergraduate education, James Simpson asks us to dwell on crucial disciplinary differences rather than fudge the similarities. We are losing students to the social sciences, he says, and that can easily engender a counter-productive effort to mimic those disciplines—or to appropriate their language—in ways that ultimately just don’t hold up. Overstating it perhaps somewhat, Simpson says that for science all truth is hypothetical; it is motivated to “destroy prior knowledge” and describe the past in terms of error. But for humanists, the past is a treasury that is “open for business.” We resist the notion of its obsolescence. Simpson goes

ation have for most of their career experienced a gradually contracting field, smaller departments, fewer of them, decreased enrollments, and constant pressure from the Dean’s office to do something about all this. Just as we are now doing on a larger scale with the humanities, we have had to undergo a long process of introspection and curricular reform, even when we felt we were responding to larger social trends that were and are largely out of our control. We were always reacting, often, I think, too late to make much of a difference.

22 Gregory Baum, *Man Becoming: God in Secular Experience* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971).

23 One cannot subordinate “the human” to the same kind of instrumentalizing, and highly skeptical scrutiny characteristic of the natural (and many social) sciences and hope for a repeatable result. There are some truths, as William James argued well over a century ago in his classic *Varieties of Religious Experience*, that need to be approached with love rather than hostility and skepticism. His prime example is the “truth” of human relationships, which, if greeted with skepticism will sour precisely for that reason. Analogously, the humanities, known for their fundamentally “relational” epistemic structure (see below), must in a sense be first “loved” in order to be known.



on to distinguish between scientific discovery and humanistic “recovery,” arguing that the fundamental mental project is different: the humanities work on the assumption that knowledge is immanent, that there is no cognition without recognition. The term “experimentation” also has very different meanings in the two fields. Whereas the scientist seeks to take herself out of the equation, out of history, the humanist embeds herself within it. Humanities “experiments”—if we want to use that term—are not replicable precisely because of our position within history. We interpret “data” from a position firmly within the hermeneutic circle, and our truth is always relational.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, I wish to show that a “holistic approach” to human existence can and should find resonance in the *kind* of humanities we practice. In this case, I argue for a strong analogy between the foundational concept of IHD and the inclusive approach to literature and culture championed in the recent work of Rita Felski and Toril Moi. Their advocacy of a capacious manner of reading and criticism that values the whole person finds precise resonance in IHD. Further, Moi’s ardent promotion of a Wittgensteinian view of language (against the structuralist view associated with Saussure) sponsors a view of the humanities fully congruent with the one I articulate here: in fact one could say that the individual’s relationship to language (on Wittgenstein’s account) precisely mirrors the relationship of the humanist to the humanities that I advocate here. This intriguing correspondence, which I explore in the following two sections, brings, I hope, greater clarity to the questions at hand. But it is not meant to elevate “Catholic humanities” over other paradigms that may be conceptually amenable and/or complementary to the one I seek to illuminate here.

#### *B. IHD’s “thick” yet open-ended anthropology*

What if it were possible both to meaningfully commit and openly inquire at the same time (say, as in a friendship)? This both/and quality is illustrated particularly well in the conception of “integral human development” (IHD) from Catholic social teaching—a concept, I argue, that is both robust enough to provide substantive guidance and yet sufficiently supple and open-ended such that it can be debated and re-defined almost infinitely to fit different times and circumstances.<sup>25</sup> While it undoubtedly emanates from a particular religious worldview, it has proven valuable in the secular academy, and especially, as David Addis suggests, to those working in the area of development and humanitarian aid.<sup>26</sup>

One can approach the conjunction of Catholicism and the humanities from a number of angles, including historical, institutional, as well as broad philosophical convergences. I find integral human development (IHD) particularly compelling because it is compatible with multiple (religious) traditions; can effectively engage secular colleagues;

24 Simpson (op. cit.) here echoes the distinction William James famously drew in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* between “scientific truth” which approaches reality with a high degree of separation and skepticism and those truths (which James associates with religion) to which one needs to open oneself in order to experience it as real (the relational side).

25 For a perceptive and concise overview, see John T. McGreevy, “Integral Human Development: A Brief History”: [Integral human development: A brief history - Keough School - University of Notre Dame](#)

26 Addis observes a hunger among this group of scientists and aid workers for a more coherent theoretical grounding for their work; he has offered the IHD model to overflowing rooms of scientists and aid workers eager for a richer anthropology than the utilitarianism implicit in most development research.

requires an interdisciplinary approach; and finally, for biographical reasons: because it is the approach that has meant the most to me since my student days at Georgetown University, and is the structuring principle of the Keough School of Global Affairs, where I currently teach.

The term has its roots in the 1967 encyclical *Populorum Progressio* (On the Development of Peoples) by Paul VI, where we read “The development we speak of here cannot be restricted to economic growth alone. To be authentic, it must be well rounded; it must foster the development of each person and the whole person.”<sup>27</sup> In the intervening decades IHD has been elaborated upon by a number of thinkers, but several factors remain constant. Emanating from a concern for under-resourced and neglected peoples, IHD has from the beginning connoted a rejection of the “thin” approach to development efforts that focus primarily or exclusively upon economic gain. Second, it has always insisted upon a multi-layered, “thick” conception of individuals.

In his short working paper titled “Integral Human Development’: Brief Reflections on the Concept in Light of a Teaching Experience,” the ethicist Clemens Sedmak summarizes IHD thus:

- IHD is meant to question the assumption that development is to be equated with economic development.
- It questions the divide between so-called “developed” and “underdeveloped” peoples specifically by calling attention to the dangers both of “under development” and “super-development.”
- In this way it challenges the primacy of rich countries, and offers critique of unbridled consumerism and overproduction.
- IHD infuses a value perspective into development deliberations, while remaining open to values debates
- The specific values articulated in IHD can be summarized as: solidarity, inclusion, and the common good
- IHD’s focus on the “whole person” is in a sense a response to Marcuse’s warning of the reductive pressures of capitalism (One Dimensional Man). In contrast, it propagates a rich conception of human “interiority,” which, as defined by Charles Taylor in *Sources of the Self*, includes “a complexity of desires, beliefs, and emotions.”
- The conception of the human at the core of IHD is profoundly intersectional.<sup>28</sup>

Appleby and Talbot articulate this final point thus: “Each person is understood not only as the site of material needs, or the consumer of goods, or the citizen/political subject, or the creator and bearer of culture, or the inheritor of a particular history, social identity, and set of relationships, or the member of a religious community or volunteer network. Rather, each person is understood as the nexus of all of these complex, overlapping and co-imbricated dimensions of human life. The human person is an integral

27 Papal Encyclicals Online: <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/paul06/p6develo.htm>

28 Cited with permission of the author.

(interdependent, connected) being . . .”<sup>29</sup> In renouncing simplistic, or “thin” models of human behavior (e.g., “economic man,” “the rational actor”), and by insisting on a nuanced, dynamic view of the human person, IHD seeks to correct the reductive tendencies within capitalism (where the individual is frequently viewed as either a laborer or consumer) and in the social sciences. It recommends itself strongly to the humanities in general, and comports particularly well, I contend, with my own field of literary studies, where ambiguity, multiple perspectives, and protean notions of selfhood are often highly valued.<sup>30</sup>

Of course conceptualizing something as elusive as “the human” is bound to have its considerable limitations. Sedmak articulates them succinctly: “The meaning of ‘human,’ with a potentially essentialist or anthropocentric reading of development, and the meaning of ‘development,’ with its lingering associations of ‘(linear) progress’ or ‘growth,’ may give grounds for skepticism. Some people may worry about the ‘hidden semantic imports’ when using this concept with its origins in a Catholic theological tradition. Which (epistemic, ontological) commitments are implicitly accepted when using the term?” (4). I will have more to say about “semantic imports” below. Here I would highlight Ebrahim Moosa’s admonition, offered in the context of a full faculty retreat where IHD was discussed at some length, that the term central to IHD, “human,” cannot be used in ignorance of its variant historical meanings—meanings that have authorized slavery, gender discrimination, denigrations of outgroups, etc. Human dignity, he reminded us, is not self-evident; invoking Benjamin, he cautions, “every document of civilization is also a document of barbarism.”<sup>31</sup>

There are of course additional, serious challenges—ranging from definition of terms to “complexity fatigue” in the face of adequately assessing human intersectionality. But the Keough School faculty debate, one in an ongoing series, leads me to believe that IHD can function well heuristically for a diverse group of scholars, the majority of whom are secular, non-Catholics. Colleagues who have arrived recently from other institutions noted the comparative advantage of possessing a set of coherent concepts that set us apart from the dominant neo-liberal paradigm, from Chinese “authoritarian capitalism,” and the World Bank’s fixation on GDP instead of the richer HDI (human development index). Diane Desierto, professor of human rights law and co-author of the new United Nations Convention on the Right to Development (to be voted on in Geneva in April of 2020), asserted that IHD language “is alive and well in rights dis-

29 Scott Appleby and Michael Talbot, “Toward Integral Human Development: A Vision for the Keough School of Global Affairs,” 2017. Internal working paper, University of Notre Dame.

30 For example, William Empson’s hugely influential *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (New York: New Directions, 1947), first published in Britain in 1930, or Dorrit Cohn’s *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978). In a similar vein, Terry Eagleton writes this of the capacity of great novelists to portray complex issues of morality (as opposed to moralism): “To grasp morality as a great novelist understands it is to see it as an intricately woven texture of nuances, qualities and fine gradations. Novels convey moral truths, though not in the sense of the term that Oral Roberts or Ian Paisley would recognize. A novel with a moral is not likely to be morally interesting” (*After Theory*, p. 144).

31 Ebrahim Moosa, Response to Clemens Sedmak, Faculty Forum on IHD, Keough School of Global Affairs, August 23, 2019.

course,” and that it has inspired both the new (draft) Convention as well as the 1986 Declaration on the Right to Development.<sup>32</sup>

The advantages of adopting an IHD-centered approach to the humanities are, as I adumbrated above, threefold: 1) IHD is legible and accessible to colleagues across the university; indeed it is already part of recognized development parlance at the United Nations; 2) IHD is an interdisciplinary concept that connects a complex sense of selfhood to policy studies and social sciences; 3) With its birth during the reform movements of the late 1960s, and its strong rearticulation by Pope Francis recently, IHD enjoys a high degree of familiarity, enthusiasm, and acceptance among diverse groups of people. While its complex, multi-layered, and fundamentally intersectional view of human beings is most relevant to the evolution in the field of literary and cultural studies that I will discuss below, it is just as important, I think, to emphasize the interdisciplinary network-character of IHD. It presents a kind of “seamless garment” (to borrow a central image from Catholic moral teaching) that invariably connects us to other disciplines because of its firm commitment to view human beings holistically.<sup>33</sup>

If we labor in the classroom to tease out the nuanced view of human emotions, perspectives, and layers of consciousness encoded for example in a challenging poem, we may not simply wish to leave it there. The humanities may from one perspective (Menand) represent the utterly useless and non-instrumentalizable. But IHD reminds us that our work also links logically to the urgent topics of human rights and human development. At a time when we are being asked to explain our relevance to the “real world,” it is helpful, I think, to have this in-built bridge to the social sciences. And conversely, at least at my institution, IHD helps make the case to my policy colleagues for the importance of the humanities. When it comes to the immigration crisis, for example, nobody hesitates to credit the role of literature and film in conveying the deep humanity of refugees, as opposed to viewing them as mere data points or abstract “drivers” of right-wing populism and xenophobia. Because of our commitment to IHD, and to the larger Catholic tradition of higher education, we have humanities courses deeply embedded not only in the university core curriculum, but also within the undergraduate major in Global Affairs<sup>34</sup>

*C. Reconceptualizing Literary Studies from an IHD Perspective: Toward a more holistic, “incarnational” approach to the human(ities).*

32 See for example the second paragraph from the 1986 UN Declaration on the Right to Development, which is almost a verbatim citation of IHD language: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/RightToDevelopment.aspx> The first two articles focus on the individual, giving him/her priority over the enumeration of the responsibilities of states; see especially Article 2.1: “The human person is the central subject of development and should be the active participant and beneficiary of the right to development.”

33 This integrative impulse (as against Jasper’s picture of a modern university as an “intellectual department store”) is characteristic of Catholic higher education in general. See Roche, *Intellectual Appeal of Catholicism*, pp. 33-41, here 34.

34 An overview of the Keough School of Global Affairs undergraduate major (currently a “supplemental major”) can be found here: <https://keough.nd.edu/undergrad/global-affairs-major/> The university-wide core curriculum, which adds another layer of humanities courses, can be viewed here: <https://corecurriculum.nd.edu/starting-fall-2018/>

Here I want briefly to reflect on how this has played out in my corner of the humanities, literary and cultural studies. On the one hand, we observed with the rise of the modernist paradigm the ascent of fragmented subjectivity almost as an ideal: literary modernism, on the whole, celebrates the weakened subject, the self in crisis, the “inward-turning” of the self (Dorrit Cohn),<sup>35</sup> and the demise (in the wake of Freud) of the will-dominated psyche, such that Judith Ryan, at the apex of this trend, could write an influential study of canonical modernist novels with the title *The Vanishing Subject*.<sup>36</sup> But that attenuated subjectivity (as I have argued in *The End of Modernism*) was by no means universal;<sup>37</sup> it did not, for example, apply equally to the subjectivity of the critic herself. On the contrary, the mindset of the literary critic characteristic of postmodernist theory—what we now call “critique”—was characterized by an entirely opposite set of descriptors. As Rita Felski demonstrates in *The Limits of Critique*, this was/is an era of the self-assured analyst, decidedly superior to his/her text, sitting in judgment on ideological aberrations and secreted biases.<sup>38</sup> Critique asked/asks us to expose the text, and to reveal nefarious notions lurking therein. Armed with an arsenal of “theory,” we are (or were) master sleuths unmasking unholy alliances or proving (with deconstruction) that the text in question was unable to uphold the claims it was attempting to make in the first place. The dominance of the “critique” model of aesthetic inquiry installed radical skepticism at the expense of other legitimately humanistic values, such as orientation, inspiration, consolation, and self-cultivation. This opposite form of modernist subjectivity, decidedly outward-turning and self-confident, is reflected in the first term of David Hollinger’s more capacious dyad, “The Knower and the Artificer.”<sup>39</sup> Modernism has always had its share of scientific “knowers,” but in the literary realm, one was more likely to find this species represented as theorists (and practitioners of critique) rather than as novelistic heroes. In privileging “the knower’s” suspicion, interrogation, and distrust over other genuinely humane and humanistic values, we effectively (if not intentionally) undermine a broad-based understanding and support of the humanities.

While Toril Moi shares Felski’s views broadly, she is more radical in her analysis. Her 2017 *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* takes us back to the roots of the critique movement, and argues that poststructuralist theory rests upon a faulty understanding of Saussure’s notion of the divided sign.<sup>40</sup> That is a detailed and complex argument to which I cannot possibly here do justice. But for the purposes of this essay, it is perhaps sufficient to note the wide gap she opens between critique’s wares (“undecidability,” and deconstructed language that al-

35 Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds*, op. cit.

36 Judith Ryan, *The Vanishing Subject: Early Psychology and Literary Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

37 William Collins Donahue, *The End of Modernism: Elias Canetti’s Auto da Fe* (2001; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020); see esp. cc. 5 & 6.

38 Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

39 David A. Hollinger, “The Knower and the Artificer,” *American Quarterly* 39.1 (Spring 1987), pp. 37-55.

40 Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies After Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

ways fails) and its practitioners, who wield their judgments with alleged “theoretical precision” that sometimes borders on the authoritarian. These theorists—and she takes special aim at Saussure, Derrida, de Man, Jameson, Culler, et al.—implicitly exempt themselves from the cognitive impairment and linguistic fallibility they so freely diagnose in literature.<sup>41</sup> Moi discloses what Simpson would call disciplinary confusion: humanists, through their application of “theoretical rigor,” are playing the role of natural scientists, without acknowledging the inconsistency in their own anthropology. There is at the core of the theory project, she argues, an unacknowledged mimicking of scientific method that belies the fundamentally relational epistemology of the humanities.

This confusion of roles is compounded by theory’s radically reductive view of human experience with language. Moi shows how Saussure has been misappropriated by Derrida, de Man, as well as by their many acolytes in a manner that appears to authorize extreme and unfounded skepticism about the function of language to communicate and refer (a point Kakutani would surely have applauded had her book not already gone to press). If we conclude every “vertiginous” deconstructionist analysis by arriving at the virtually foregone conclusion of “undecidability,” Moi argues, we have done not only an injustice to language as we experience it, but have simultaneously undercut our utility for productive social analysis and for the work of social justice. Here it might be useful to recall those idealistic young students Simpson spoke of earlier, who in great numbers enter higher education with a professed interest in “making the world a better place.” If our most sophisticated accomplishment is to draw their attention to the failure of language—and fail it surely sometimes does—then we will have written our own obituary.

Following philosopher Stanley Cavell, Moi diagnoses contemporary theory’s excessive “craving for abstraction,” as well as its tendency to radically reduce the role of individual agency in its penchant for speaking of language itself as some kind of extra-human “system.” This way of speaking, which is antithetical to the IHD project, essentially subtracts the human from humanism, and presents not only a grave philosophical problem, but a practical barrier to our success in the academy. The antidote, as Moi argues, is to set aside the hubristic attempt to theorize language as such, and to attend to the many actual “uses” and “life forms” that constitute it. This means, as she says, quoting Wittgenstein, “rooting around in the common, in the ordinary, and the quotidian.” It means sacrificing the megalomaniacal ambitions of grand theories (and in this respect she shares something with postmodernism after all), and adopting a more humble attitude to the multitudinous aspects of our existence.

The centrality of Wittgenstein to Moi’s case poses two challenges: First, he is widely ignored, misunderstood, or caricatured by literary scholars. Second, Wittgenstein’s vaunted “anti-metaphysical” stance would seem on its face incompatible with IHD in particular and with Catholic humanism more generally. Yet neither poses an insur-

41 In my 2019 essay, “A Joyful Palace Revolution,” published as part of *The Tank’s* feature forum on *Revolution of the Ordinary*, I provide a fuller assessment of Moi’s argument. Other contributors to the forum include Sarah Beckwith, Henry Staten, Theo Davis, Oren Izenberg, Yi-Ping Ong, Davis Smith-Brecheisen, Rob Chodat, and Toril Moi. The entire forum can be accessed here: <https://nonsite.org/feature/revolution-of-the-ordinary-literary-studies-after-wittgenstein-austin-and-cavell>

mountable obstacle. The first problem is largely attributable to the distorted Frankfurt School image we have of Wittgenstein from Herbert Marcuse, as well as to an ignorance of Wittgenstein's posthumous *Philosophical Investigations*. Moi goes a long way to address both deficits. Second, the late Wittgenstein, as he is deployed by Moi, is remarkably compatible with Catholic "incarnational" theology that precisely elevates the "the ordinary and the quotidian" and eschews abstractions that diminish human dignity. In Moi's approach I perceive a profound resonance with the "low Christology" of Catholicism, specifically with its loving, phenomenological approach to creation. Furthermore, Wittgenstein's (and Moi's) insistence that humanists are embedded in language (rather than masters of it); that all humanists are therefore essentially "participant observers"; and that our knowledge is thus relational, converges perfectly with IHD's values of inclusion, solidarity and "accompaniment," and with its starting point of viewing the individual in relation to community. While IHD (and Catholic thinking in general) tries to strike a balance between immanence and transcendence, there is a strong and clear prohibition against human usurpation of the transcendent position. This, I would argue, makes those humanists working within an IHD environment possibly more sensitive to illegitimate arrogations of epistemological privilege, such as those diagnosed by Moi.

Finally, and most importantly, Moi's much broader approach to literary studies finds support and independent justification in IHD discourse. What both Felski and Moi really contest is critique's hegemony in the academy and the fact that it is insufficiently capacious to accommodate the full range of legitimate human interactions with literature and art. Critique does not, for example, recognize our positive responses to literature and art—to see in them, for example, possible moments of inspiration, support, affirmation, recognition, illumination, and consolation. In the *Uses of Literature*, Felski identifies these four neglected areas and dedicates a chapter to each: recognition, enchantment, knowledge, and shock. For Moi, the key term to indicate this more expansive response to art is "acknowledgement," which suggests among other things a sense of mutuality and a dose of humility vis-a-vis the work of art. Continuing her efforts to legitimize a richer pallet of aesthetic response, Moi has recently taken on one of critique's sacred cows, namely the prohibition on identifying with a literary character.<sup>42</sup> Identifying, she says is not a monolithic or binary affair. Neither does it mean sacrificing a critical stance; in fact, it may logically follow precisely from such an assessment. Widening the aperture on aesthetic responses in this manner opens us up to a richer view both of humanity and the humanities. Furthermore, it enhances (rather than dulls) the critical skills necessary to advance the cause of social justice. One need not accept theory's implicit trade-off: a pared down image of language and human agency as the price to be paid for superior insight and critical prowess. On the contrary, Moi shows that by expanding literary studies to include--indeed, to welcome--affirmative responses to art, we arguably place ourselves in a better position to advocate for the socially emarginated and underprivileged (her examples, drawn from her own areas of intel-

42 See Amanda Anderson, Rita Felski, and Toril Moi, *Character: Three Inquiries in Literary Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), especially "Rethinking Character," pp. 27-75.

lectual expertise and social activism, center on feminism). This linking of aesthetics to policy and politics is perfectly consonant with IHD, which from its moment of articulation has insisted precisely on this connection.<sup>43</sup>

One critic of this more variegated and inclusive view of the humanities, here taking particular aim at Felski, asserts, “if the postcritical project is going to survive, it can’t just rest on the idea that we have to make literary studies comprehensible to people who don’t know a lot about it or don’t do the requisite reading.”<sup>44</sup> First, I’d say that “post-critical” is an unfortunate turn of phrase, one that actually distorts the case Moi and Felski are making (neither disqualifies critique per se, least of all Felski). Second, what we encounter here is both an anxiety about loss of expertise and a fear of opening the floodgates to unworthy students and readers. I don’t think either point is relevant in the least. If we want the humanities to survive, indeed to thrive, we need precisely to adopt this “broad church” approach, to seek out those who may love and enjoy the arts, but don’t yet know what this kind of scholarship is good for.

In this essay, I have argued that there are a number of practical, institutional things we can do (and not do) to help bring about this change. I’ve also argued that the concept of integral human development, central to Catholic social teaching, provides a cogent point of departure and rationale for this richer view of the human subject and of the humanities. This broader view includes placing the humanities not in an ever-shrinking silo of their own, but rather in direct dialogue with policy and social science colleagues. It calls us to identify positive justifications for our work, not just negative suppositions that imagine the humanities as ipso facto combatants in the great struggle against The Corporate University. We’ve seen that those “thinner” approaches—call them “postmodernism” (with Eagleton), or “critique” (with Felski and Moi)—purvey their own assumptions about what it means to be human as well. These too are beliefs. One advantage of IHD may be that the faith proposition with respect to a multivalent, intersectional conception of human beings is simply more explicit and well articulated. To appreciate how mutually reinforcing IHD and this “big tent” view of the humanities are does not of course require a particular investment in Catholicism. Armed with the recognition that the humanities—given their core subject matter—will always be elusive, and will therefore always require prior commitments, readers may find in their own traditions—religious or secular—resources that might similarly sustain a more vi-

43 Interestingly—and perhaps predictably—this very prospect of expanding our reach has been used to ridicule them. Training a withering “symptomatic reading” on those who would dare to dismantle critique’s monopoly on literary and cultural studies, Felski’s detractors have diagnosed her more inclusive brand of reading as an unacknowledged attempt to appease conservatives who cannot abide the subversive thrust of critique. “These skeptics [her detractors], in classic critique fashion . . . see the methods fight as a displacement of larger economic concerns: an attempt to make a case for literary study as budgets are cut and career opportunities dry up” (Marc Parry, “What’s Wrong with Literary Studies?”, *Chronicle of Higher Education* [November 27, 2016; print edition: December 2, 2016]: <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Whats-Wrong-With-Literary/238480> As one of Felski’s disparagers put it, “It’s not the case that if you were just less politicized in your reading of Jane Austin, all of a sudden Scott Walker’s going to say, ‘Oh, no, I love the University of Wisconsin system” (Lee Konstantinou, quoted in Parry, *ibid.*).

44 Lee Konstantinou, quoted in Parry, “What’s Wrong,” *ibid.*



brant, inclusive view of our enterprise. Whatever else we do, we of course need to shed the condescension about the ignorant masses--those who just "don't do the requisite reading." The humanities can ill afford this attitude if we hope to continue to contemplate the ends of the humanities (in the sense of our mission or goals), rather than the actual end of the humanities.

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