THE CASE FOR PUBLIC INVESTMENT IN THE HUMANITIES

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> 'I dare hope why it might now begin to be clearer why I am arguing that an education which includes the "humanities" is essential to political wisdom. By "humanities" I especially mean history; but close behind history and of almost, if not quite equal importance are letters, poetry, philosophy, the plastic arts, and music. Most of the issues that mankind sets out to settle, it never does settle. They are not solved because … they are incapable of solution properly speaking, being concerned with incommensurables. At any rate, even if that be not always true, the opposing parties seldom do agree upon a solution; and the dispute fades into the past unsolved, though perhaps it may be renewed as history, and fought over again. It disappears because it is replaced by some compromise that, although not wholly acceptable to either side, offers a tolerable substitute for victory; and he who would find the substitute needs an endowment as rich as possible in experience, an experience which makes the heart generous and provides the mind with an understanding of the hearts of others'. Learned Hand[2]

INTRODUCTION

I will make the case today for public investment in the Humanities and I will do so by reflecting on Learned Hand's celebration of the Humanities. The question for this conference is not whether there should be public investment in Ontario's universities but rather how extensive an investment. Framing the question that way might seem to do away with the need to make a case for public investment. But in a world of scarce resources, the

two questions—'Should there be investment?' and 'How much should there be?'--are linked. And we all know that it is fairly easy to argue that engineering, or medicine, or even the pure sciences should be publicly funded because these disciplines seem to have either immediate or indirect cash value in the real world. Graduates in these disciplines have a clear route to jobs and the economy is a clear beneficiary. There is a direct return or, at worst, an indirect return on public investment.

But we also all know that it is not so straightforward to make the case for public investment in the Humanities. In South Africa, where I did my first five years of university, the BA degree was commonly and not kindly said to stand for Bugger All, since bugger all 'useful' was learnt. And this kind of attitude towards the Humanities is hardly confined to South Africa.

One response to this kind of attitude is John Henry Newman's, who in 1852 in his famous lectures on the topic, *The Idea of a University*, argued that 'Knowledge is, not merely a means to something beyond it, or the preliminary of certain arts into which it naturally resolves, but an end sufficient to rest in and to pursue for its own sake'.[3] As Jaroslav Pelikan has pointed out in his reexamination of the same topic, Newman felt compelled to engage in a polemic against utilitarianism because he had to deal with a campaign to eliminate from the curriculum 'traditional fields of inquiry that could not be justified on the grounds of their usefulness'.[4] And Newman's task was made even harder by the fact that his lectures were delivered as part of his own campaign—to procure support for the foundation of the Catholic University of Ireland. As a result, he argued in his lectures that theology had not only a place, but the central place, in the curriculum.

But knowledge for knowledge's sake is not only an inadequate slogan to combat an even more unrelenting utilitarian campaign than Newman faced; it is also inadequate for

reasons that go beyond the expedience of the moment. For it might be right that if the Humanities are not useful, there is no reason for the public to invest in them. At most, they should be preserved in the great private universities of the United States of America--a luxury for those institutions which can fund useless inquiry from private pockets. Indeed, Newman found himself in some tension here as those who wanted him to direct the Catholic University had in mind an institution which would equip young Catholic men to enter the establishment on equal terms with those who were educated at Oxbridge.

The problem, in my view, lies not in utilitarianism's focus on consequences or on usefulness, nor in the general instrumental character of its arguments. Rather, the problem lies in the kinds of consequences utilitarianism deems relevant and thus the goals which figure in its instrumental arguments. The problem arises when we deem the category of the useful to be confined to that which is capable of contributing directly or indirectly to the gross domestic product.

There is however another more expansive sense of usefulness even in the utilitarian tradition; as John Stuart Mill put it, utility is best understood as 'grounded on the permanent interest of man as a progressive being'.[5] And it is just that sense of usefulness, one to be found in a tradition of thought I will call pragmatic liberalism, on which Learned Hand relies.

THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING HUMAN

The lengthy passage from Learned Hand comes not from a discussion of the Humanities but from a discussion of the skills he thought required of a jurist, and, more generally, of those who participate in whatever way in legal order. I emphasize this point because lawyers like

medical doctors can claim a place as indirect contributors to the economy; just as medical doctors keep us fit for work, lawyers both provide the framework of rules that make it possible for individual interaction to be productive as well as solutions to the problems that arise when the rules are not sufficient to maintain interaction. It is significant that Hand, who was not only one of the great practitioners of the law in the USA, but also one of the pioneers of the Law and Economics approach to law, thought that a training in the Humanities is indispensable for a lawyer. I am though less interested in that bare fact than in his argument for the fact. The argument can be broken down into the following propositions:

1. There are no permanent solutions to most of humankind's problems and even where there do appear to be such solutions not all parties will agree that this is the case.
2. However, we do move ahead and that is because we are capable of reaching compromises which, while not wholly satisfactory to either side, are a 'tolerable substitute for victory'.
3. In order to be capable of finding such a compromise one must have certain attributes: 'an endowment as rich as possible in experience' and an experience of a particular kind—one which 'makes the heart generous and provides the mind with an understanding of the hearts of others'.

The third proposition is one about the kinds of persons who might contribute to solving the problems of humankind because of their ability to reach productive compromises. That kind of person has to be capable of being open to others, a capacity which Hand seems to suggest can be cultivated by one's educational experience. But the importance of experience goes beyond the educational experience in which this personality is cultivated. The kind of person Hand depicts is one who is willing to let her ideas be tested against experience. And

since one of her attributes is the ability to reach compromises with other people, openness is not only to experience but to the understandings of experience of the others with whom one has to compromise.

The experience Hand has in mind is not the experience of the natural world which forms the testing ground for scientific hypotheses, nor is it the hard data of people's lives which are the subject of the Social Sciences. Rather, it is people's *lived* experience--the way they understand their economic, social, political and quite personal moral experience. It is in the Humanities that questions about this kind of experience are studied. But if one values education in the Humanities for these reasons, one will also not think that that education stops as one exits the university for the 'real' world. For an education in the Humanities is supposed to issue in a kind of person who is prepared for a lifelong process of education, through the capacity to be open to learning from others.

What we have here is an understanding of the excellent citizen—of someone who will benefit the public even if his activity is confined to the private realm. This understanding is liberal and pragmatic. It is liberal in its optimistic view of the individual as capable of continual, self-directed improvement of both him- or herself and the world. It is pragmatic because of its emphasis on experience as the testing ground for our ideas.

Let us contrast this liberal, pragmatic kind of person with the kind of person encouraged by what I will call crude utilitarianism: the relentless maximizer of personal satisfaction. Crude utilitarianism holds that there is no measure of goodness outside of this person's own set of preferences and judgments about the means to satisfy preferences. Other people are there to be used as resources in the maximization project and constraints on such use are only those constraints that are necessary to make it possible for all people to be relentless maximizers. Similarly, the only public resources crude utilitarianism needs are those that

create a framework which makes it possible for people to interact without harming each other.

Now crude utilitarianism makes a claim with a public aspect. It claims that we will all be better off if its understanding of the person is adopted. But it has no place in its design of public space for institutions other than those that will facilitate the pursuit of individual satisfaction. Moreover, public investment in educational institutions should be confined to the extent necessary to compensate for market failure—for those gaps that private initiative will not by itself fill but which must be filled if the framework for individual interaction is to be maintained. Finally, such public investment as there is in education should be confined to the skills that are necessary to sustain either directly or indirectly the framework. Other kinds of inquiry including the Humanities are not ruled out. Rather, they are luxuries in which people may indulge only if they as individuals are willing to bear or to subsidize the costs.

There is at least one severe tension in this crude utilitarian view of education. The view is itself a product of the interaction of social, economic and political currents; but like any idea it is much more than that. Its force as an idea, an idea which plays its own role in promoting certain currents rather than others, comes from its articulation. And that articulation is most elaborate and sophisticated in university departments: for instance, in philosophy, political science and economics departments. Indeed, economics departments and even many political science departments now sometimes seem to be for the most part decidedly anti-humanistic in their orientation, focused on mathematical or quasi-mathematical inquiries in which human beings figure only as stripped down maximizers.

But one should recall both that this idea of the person had to be forged before it could drive inquiry and that it was forged by economists who pursued their inquiries in a distinctly

humanistic mode—a group which in my view includes Adam Smith, but also Friedrich von Hayek and Milton Friedman.[6] In sum, the idea of the person promoted by crude utilitarianism leads to a view of education which is at odds with the education it took to produce that idea. It is as though crude utilitarianism supposes that one can climb the ladder of the Humanities and that at the top, having reached the truth about the nature of the rational person, one can kick the ladder away.

But the ladder cannot be kicked away so easily. The very utility of this idea of the person is subject to challenge from within the discipline of economics, most notably by Amartya Sen. Sen, I think it is fair to say, wishes to make the 'science' of economics more humanistic in order that it might better promote the welfare of the individuals whose interests it aims to serve.

It is thus important to see that the fact that the conception of the individual as a relentless maximizer arose from the Humanities. But it is even more important to see that challenges to it are inevitable and vital. We continue to challenge our conceptions and we continue to inquire into how we are or ought to be as human beings. This inquiry is the stuff of the Humanities. And it is what enables us to fully live up to our potential.

We are not yet at the point of establishing the case for public investment in the Humanities. But the contrast between the liberal pragmatic view of the person and the crude utilitarian view is instructive. First, the liberal pragmatic view does not exclude the crude utilitarian view from having any role in inquiry. As my colleagues in the Law Faculty who work within the discipline of Law and Economics argue, the crude utilitarian view can be extremely helpful when it comes to exploring the incentive structure created by different regulatory schemes. But that is because they are all, as far as I can tell, liberal pragmatists, who conceive of the discipline of law as humanistically as any philosopher. In contrast, those

who think that the crude utilitarian view is not just a useful tool for some inquiries, but a normative base for public policy in general, exclude other conceptions of the person from debate about appropriate public policy. Second, the liberal pragmatist is at the least agnostic about whether the educational space within which ideas about personality are to be cultivated should be publicly or privately funded. In contrast, as we have seen, for crude utilitarians, public policy and public institutions are instrumental only to very particular goals. A society should take collective action and establish institutions which make such action possible only when successful individual interaction, aimed as maximizing satisfaction of preferences, is not possible without such interventions. In short, the public realm is there only in so far as it is necessary to compensate for market failure. Together, these two differences are from the crude utilitarian perspective lethal to a case for public investment in the Humanities.

I said that the liberal pragmatist is at the least agnostic about whether the educational space within which the individual is to be cultivated should be publicly or privately funded. But it is important to emphasize the phrase 'at the least'. For liberal pragmatists, as I will now argue, must be committed to much more than the proposition that public investment in the Humanities is merely legitimate, in that it cannot be excluded a priori as crude utilitarians would prefer. They must, that is, be committed to the view that public investment in the Humanities is required.

THE PUBLIC NATURE OF THE HUMANITIES

The liberal pragmatic conception of the person has more a much more robust public aspect to it than does crude utilitarianism. . The beneficial consequences that flow from it are not

limited to the wealth of a society measured in monetary terms. They are consequences for, or instrumental to securing, a stock of public goods--human capital, as it is sometimes put. And here "human capital" is not understood in terms of what is capable of generating economic returns on investment: the average student trained in philosophy will contribute $X to GDP over her life. Rather, it is understood very closely to the idea of the Humanities--of the cultivation of people who are humane in the way Hand describes, or as the Oxford English dictionary defines: 'Characterized by such behaviour or disposition towards others as befits a man: civil; courteous, obliging …; kind, benevolent'. Such people constitute a stock of public goods because they carry in themselves the resources of a civilized society.

It is, in my view, difficult to overestimate how valuable a resource this is. Each generation of students needs to ask questions about what it is to be a citizen, to be benevolent, to be human. The Humanities are the location of this engagement. To the extent that professional faculties and the applied sciences have become more or even considerably occupied by the need to answer such questions within their own curricula, they have, to use a word I only just learned from the Oxford English Dictionary, been humanized.

In asking such questions, each generation of students will be led to further questions; for example, the question whether genes, sociological circumstances, and the contingencies of history determine behaviour, so that there is no making sense of praise or blame for worthy or odious acts, or even the question whether it makes sense to use the labels 'worthy' and 'odious'. But the issue is not whether questions about free will and determinism can ever be settled, but to see, with Learned Hand, that it is in the asking of such questions, in our engagement with them, that we learn something crucial about what it is to be human.

It is worth noting that the Humanities attracts a disproportionate share of students. This is because it is in the Humanities that deep, subtle and pressing questions are advanced:

What is of value in life? How did we get to where we are, socially, politically and morally. Students sense that these questions are essential. But my question is: should government also adopt that sense?

The problem with crude utilitarianism is not only that is does not think such questions worth asking since it believes that they have been settled, but that it supposes that the funds for those who wish to engage in such questions should be entirely private. But civil society is a not a private matter. It is profoundly public, something which, as Thomas Hobbes argued, has to be put in place in order to make successful private interaction at all possible. I mention Hobbes because he is often thought of as the arch individualist, even as the founder of the crude utilitarian conception of the person. But there is no more powerful expositor than Hobbes of the argument that the public is prior to the private, so that the public establishment of a civil society is necessary for successful private interaction. And for him an education in which universities have a central role is a crucial component in the structure of such a society.[7]

Now it is perhaps possible to imagine a society in which education in the Humanities is provided by private investment only. But one would have good reason to doubt that society's commitment to being a civil society. A society that wants to be a civil society, to be humane or decent, is also a society that understands that a public realm has to be maintained as a priority over the realm of private interaction. And such a society would be hypocritical if did not invest resources in maintaining the public realm.

This idea is well understood by Canadians who regard universal health care as an achievement, as a public good whose value cannot be reduced to economics, since it is an expression of a commitment to living in a decent society. As far as health care is concerned, it is important not only that every individual in a decent society has access to it, but that the

resource of health care is regarded primarily as a public one. We as a public are required to invest in universal health care because if we did not do so our understanding of our society as one in which individuals are committed to treating each other with equal concern and respect would be in doubt. And the argument is consequentialist or instrumental to its core—it is about the consequences to us as human beings should we move too far away from that commitment. It is not then just our understanding of society that is at stake but our understanding of ourselves as fully human.

Of course, in a world of scarce resources we cannot have all we want even when it comes to health care. But the default position for liberal pragmatists is that when it comes to what we can call public goods, goods that are constitutive of the public realm, the public must be committed to maintaining the resources necessary to them. Only if it is clear that the society cannot muster the resources to do this, should private markets be considered as having a place in compensating for public failure. It is a serious mistake then to let one's outlook be framed by an idea that the state is there solely to compensate for market failure. On the most important issues, when it comes to public goods, the public realm comes first. And if that deeply humanistic argument is right, then the case is now complete for public investment in the Humanities, at the highest possible level a society can maintain. The case is complete if what we want to be is a humane, decent or civil society.

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[2] As quoted in Frank M. Turner, "Newman's University and Ours", in Frank M. Turner, ed., John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1996) 282, at 300.

[3] Newman, ibid, 78. Newman went on to say of knowledge (ibid, 79): 'That further advantages accrue to us and redound to others by its possession, over and above what it is in itself, I am very far indeed from denying; but, independent of these, we are satisfying a direct need of our nature in its very acquisition; and whereas our

nature, unlike that of the inferior creation, does not at once reach its perfection, but depends, in order to it, on a number of external aids and appliances. Knowledge, as one of the principal of these, is valuable for what its very presence does for us after the manner of a habit, even though it be turned to no further account, nor subserve any direct end'. A careful reading of this passage does make is susceptible to a much more instrumental understanding of knowledge than Newman seems to want—knowledge is important for us to be fully human and, by implication, the world is better off if it is populated by fully human beings.

[4] Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Idea of the University: A Reexamination* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1992) 33.

[5] John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* in *Collected Works*, vol. 18 ed. J.M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1984) 275.

[6] Of course, some of the people who work in this mode might have thought of their work as more scientific than humanistic and might even have seen it as a reaction to what they regarded as the bad modes of thought promoted in the Humanities of their day. I am thus using 'Humanities' anachronistically to describe work of the sort that would today be done within the Humanities, including the more Humanities-oriented parts of the Social Sciences; for example, political theory or political economy.

[7] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* Richard Tuck ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

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Learned Hand