The Status of Knowledge and New Directions for the Humanities

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An art work, created by Korean artist Paik Nam-june called "Descartes" may be found exhibited at the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Gwachun, a town adjacent to Seoul. The work seems to be saying: "My brain processes digitally, therefore I am". Paik represents Descartes, the philosopher of Rationalist Dualism, as a robot of Physicalist Digitalism. As Paik's digital processes threaten to displace Descartes' mental processes, the work poses the question of how long the human mind will be considered an essential part of human existence. Whereas Descartes articulated the long-held dualist tradition of the West through his rationalist discourse, Paik has been at the forefront of attempts in the art world to show the ubiquity and plasticity of digital languages through his video art works. In this article I will focus on how the monistic epistemology of logocentrism gives way to pluralistic epistemologies, and will explore the implications that this change might have for new directions in the humanities.

The condition of knowledge, absolute or communal

Many of us are familiar with Plato's Metaphor of the Cave and the Biblical passage: "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free". Both of these propositions seem to presuppose a special notion of knowledge – namely, what may be called "knowledge as the mirror of reality". This is the view that what we experience in this world are mere phenomena and that genuine reality lies outside the world of experience. What proceed from these phenomena are doxastic conjectures, which lead to never-ending debate and confusion. However, if only we could reach true reality, this would provide us with a holistic system of knowledge, which could unite the entire human race and set us all free at last. Western tradition suggests there are two routes which may lead to this reality: reason and religion. But intellectual communities under the influence of Descartes preferred pursuing the former to the latter, believing that reason can lead humanity away from the manifold and mutable appearances of the world towards a simple reality governed by a transparent logical order. We can name this view "a realistic theory of knowledge".

A contemporary version of this theory is the tripartite model of knowledge as "justified true belief". The central idea of this theory is that a true belief can be transformed into knowledge by

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the application of reason (Plato), the presentation of evidence (A.J. Ayer), or through justification (R. M. Chisholm). But I have reservations about all three conditions in this tripartite model of knowledge. The notions of truth, belief, and justification are no longer universally held to be independent of any context, as they once were. Rather they are now widely thought to have meaning only in relation to a particular system or discourse, following the reflections of Frege, Tarski, Wittgenstein, and others. This contextualisation was a two-stage process: initially the meaning of these terms was held to be a function of a particular formal semantic context, but later this truth-based semantics yielded its dominant place to a community-based semantics.

The distinction between truth semantics and communal semantics suggests another distinction, namely, that between theory and discourse. When the meaning of a language is to be successfully expressed in terms of a truth theory, in the final analysis there will be one true theory which will explain any problem. Thus truth semantics justifies the notion of "the one true theory". But if we suppose that the communal theory of meaning is plausible, then we are not compelled to accept this idea of a single theory of everything. Rather, for any particular issue we are likely to have various communal discourses, each arising from different concrete contexts or conditions of our lives. Information provides one illustration of such pluralistic epistemologies. One way of understanding the notion of information is as a syntactical structure in a particular system rather than as a true sentence in the universal, absolute system. The former, but not the latter, allows anything to be information which is digitally processed in a specific computing language. Computers make it possible for us to access not only verbal languages but also sounds and pictures if they can be rendered syntactically in a program. Now movies and music can be accessed anywhere if they satisfy that syntactical requirement.

Human languages have evolved in accordance with the gradual growth of the plurality of forms of life of humankind. Though there are various forms of life in human communities, members of the human species, as members of a natural kind, share an important singular form of life, which allows them to translate one language into another. If we are to prefer the community-based discourse to the truth-based theory, the epistemology we should choose may be some sort of discourse which our communal interests dictate that we pursue. The activities of the discourse are bound to be dialectical or pluralistic. The discourse will encompass the questions of intellectual lives, communal advancements, and completions of individuals.

Changed human conditions and redirections for the humanities

If we grant the communal notion of knowledge, this would render our concept of the humanities different from what it has hitherto been. But what has this been? There are many ways to regard the traditional notion of the humanities. Among these are:

(H1)   The humanities are the academic disciplines which one can expect to find represented in a "College of Liberal Arts".

(H2)   The humanities are academic disciplines which study the human condition, using methods that are primarily analytic, critical or speculative, as distinguished from the mainly empirical approaches of the natural and social sciences.

(H3)   The humanities are an intellectual attempt, by means of verbal language, to broaden the possibilities of human freedom which have been limited by natural or social human conditions.

(H1) reflects the perception that the general public may have about the "humanities". This perception highlights two important issues. First, it captures modes of thinking and behaviour among the

general public towards academic departments in the humanities, in particular the fairly prevalent thought that society should invest more resources into subjects other than the humanities in order to survive in the competitive global marketplace, coupled with the impression that students of the humanities do not get the appropriate education necessary to obtain secure jobs after graduation. Second, this attitude is consistent with what has been called "the crisis of the humanities", which consists of a lack of social support for humanities courses and a dearth of students taking them. But (H1) is too restrictive to be accepted as a proper concept of the humanities. It captures only the institutional aspect of the discipline and therefore falls short of an analysis of the concept itself.

(H2) offers a dictionary definition of the humanities, in clarifying the boundaries between three major groups of academic disciplines in terms of their distinctive methodologies. This strategy is helpful as a way of making a rough demarcation between the humanities and the sciences. Yet the general public broadly does not regard these two disciplinary areas to be equally useful, a view which can, to some extent, be explained by the different methodologies employed by the humanities and the sciences.

Some of the transformations witnessed in the 20th century were profound. Human intellectual environment went through radical changes. Both social and natural sciences seemed to double their activities every ten years, not only extending the boundaries of their own fields but also maximising their contributions to society at large. But today many researchers in the humanities are busy specialising in particular limited topics, and the humanities have lost some of the appeal they enjoyed during the heyday of "grand" theories. It is ultimately not surprising that the contemporary human world prefers the positivistic, statistical, analytical approach toward the world to the idealistic, speculative, synthetic one.

But the (H2) definition limits the humanities as a methodological discipline by identifying it with a method which is "primarily analytic, critical, or speculative". This is far short of being an adequate definition of this disciplinary area since it lacks any hint of content or value-system. Besides, the natural and social sciences also employ methods which are analytic, critical or speculative, among others. (H2) thus sounds almost empty in offering an answer to the question of why the humanities are to be pursued.

(H3) identifies a particular value for the humanities, a philosophical anthropology of freedom. The proposition does not reflect a specific tradition of the classical humanities, but it does summarise a common theme which can be found in them. If this proposition is plausible, then the goal of the classical humanities may be seen as broadening the possibilities of human freedom by educating free citizens, whether of the ruling classes or the general public. From this perspective, the dominant human concerns of the classical humanities are oppression and freedom.

A natural corollary of this view is that there are various versions of the humanities, each relating to a different tradition for the understanding of human society and its liberation. It is worthwhile mentioning just three such traditions. Since the East Asian tradition took the notion of the gentleman (君子) as central to its anthropology, it regarded its classical heritage, *Gyounghak* (經學) as the core of the humanities in educating gentlemen. Ancient Greece taught humanities to the sons of her citizens in accordance with her understanding of what the sense of the rights and duties of free members of a city should be. Later, the Western Renaissance forged a notion of the human from the perspective that people need to be independent from much of the influence of the Church and the application of that idea resulted in a new direction for the humanities.

I believe that the (H3) concept represents a general consensus among college campuses concerning the nature of the humanities. Its key component might be summed up by the simple sentence, "the humanities consist of reading the classics". From this perspective, reading or understanding the classics is a sufficient condition for being a participant in the study

of humanities. In this sense, the classical humanities may be labelled "understanding-oriented humanities (u_humanities)". The experience of freedom which the classical humanities aim at is obtained through the reader's conceptual expansion of the possibility of human freedom through the study of these texts.

U_humanities has successfully fulfilled its goals by dint of a long struggle. Admittedly, there are still many people who are oppressed in various parts of the world. But it may be said that the pursuit of the idea of freedom is no longer the most important value for the definition of the humanities. There are indeed few intellectuals who would question the value of individual freedom, hence its importance may now be taken as a given. Instead, there are new values which the humanities might now concentrate on promoting in pursuit of new and higher objectives. But u_humanities is too much engaged in the verbal tradition and not sensitive to the contemporary human condition. Therefore, it may be timely to consider some alternative view, as in the following proposed definition:

> (H4)   The humanities are an attempt to express what it is to be human by means of language activities, verbal or non-verbal, factual or imaginative, in order to make humans freer with regard to the present human condition, mostly using methods that are analytic, critical, or speculative.

Perceived this way, (H4) may require reading classics as a necessary condition but does not take it as a sufficient condition for fulfilling the role of the humanities in society. (H4) allows room for disciplines such as the arts and the sciences to play a part in the humanities. But the ultimate aim of (H4) is to reconstruct the idea of freedom in such a way that it is not sufficient that humans are free from physical, economic or social constraints: human freedom becomes concrete only in a human being's realisation of his or her own self. Up to the present, humans have been oppressed and have striven to reach a state where those constraints are eliminated. But now this passive state is a value to be presupposed and no longer a value to be pursued. Humans need to set a higher value, a positive state where everyone is able to express what it is to be human.

I would like to name the humanities as conceived in (H4), "expression-oriented humanities (e_humanities)". But how specifically does this (H4) perspective differ from (H3)? Firstly, each approach has its own separate and sufficient conditions for engaging in the humanities: on the one hand, to maximise human freedom and on the other, to realise human potential. Secondly, though they both accord a supreme value to "freedom", they embody different notions of this concept. It can be said that u_humanities has a passive notion of freedom whereas e_humanities envisages an active one. The difference depends on which condition people take as sufficient for pursuing the humanities, understanding the classics or expressing oneself.

In what sense should "expression" be understood as a new value for the humanities? "Expression" can encompass at least three significantly different senses. First, in terms of linguistic discourse, "expression" can be taken to refer to the emotional component of an utterance, in contrast to "proposition", which designates the content of a sentence in terms of the rational conditions for its truth. On the other hand, "expression" can also be used to refer to the various composite units of language like phrases or sentences, without any emotional element being necessarily implied. The aspect of the word that I would like to emphasise, however, is a third meaning, which focuses on performance. "Expression" is often used to refer to those elements of an action by which one shows the character of one's agency, as in "Mary expressed her approval by nodding".

This notion of expression needs to be defined more precisely. Since it is apparent that all people are constantly engaged in one form of expression or another, it is safe to conclude that human

expression is universal, in the sense that any circumstance a person finds him- or herself in elicits a need for interpretation and expression. But the notion of expression may implicitly involve a measurement of the degree of its manifestation, for some people are able to express themselves more authentically or richly than others.

The idea that the notion of expression is universal but also admits of differences of degree suggests a need for the formulation of some principles, of which I suggest the following as being of major significance: that the realisation of oneself must be compatible with other people's realisations of themselves (成己成物).

This proposition, as a summary of a philosophical anthropology, is vague as it stands but it may be developed further to be useful. I would take this to allow a perspective from which one may view any sort of human expression and be able to evaluate it. The derivation of such principles which can regulate human expression may well furnish a means of providing new directions for the humanities.

The humanities: The gap between universities and culture

Thus far I have argued that our notions of knowledge and the approach to the humanities need to be updated. But I believe, on the one hand, that there is a gap between the humanities as taught in universities and the cultural realities to be found outside their walls, and, on the other hand, that the social and natural sciences have come to have direct relevance for the changes that are taking place in such cultural realities. It is only the humanities that have not caught up with this evolution. This may be because the humanities have relied upon verbal language as their primary mode of intellectual engagement, and thus perhaps have limited their activities only to the sphere of verbal language.

Let us re-consider the proposition (H4), that is, that the humanities are an attempt, through language activity, whether verbal or non-verbal, to express what it is to be genuinely human. The chief issue, however, is the mode of that expression itself. People find themselves, at any given moment, located within a system, and the system, once established over a period of time, tends to oppress its weaker members. The social sciences attempt to describe and understand such phenomena by methods of descriptive analysis and try to solve the problems they have identified. The humanities, on the other hand, try to approach the same phenomena by imagining what else there could be which would allow people to be free and to realise that potential. If the social sciences are mainly an actualist endeavour, then the humanities consist mostly of attempts to imagine the best possible space for human realisation. Until now, the humanities have made use of verbal languages for this purpose of "imagining" what would be possible and have been successful in performing various linear thought experiments and syntheses. That may explain why most scholars of the humanities in the past were tempted to work on so-called "grand" theories.

But contemporary cultural realities cannot be limited to the realm of verbal languages. There are many non-verbal languages which are asking to be heard. Such languages create a pluralistic, complex and rich culture. For example, the digital media have a claim to being a language in their own right. These media already play a dominant role in inducing people to consume information. Interactive digital culture has ushered in the age where "everyone produces information". The digital age is characterised by the universal consumption and production of information. People are no longer satisfied with remaining consumers of information, but feel the need to produce information themselves. The humanities, seen in this light as an expression of contemporary digital culture, are clearly thriving and successful, and the hope is that the humanities in academia can likewise thrive through embracing these new language dimensions.

Verbal languages and digital languages in the humanities

If the humanities could become pluralistic in their employment of languages, this would open up territories for new sub-disciplines within them. For example, if they could accept engagement with both verbal languages and digital languages, these two types of language would come to have distinct roles.

Digital languages would make it possible to fuse the various independent topics of the different disciplines in the humanities into a more unified study. Movies by directors like Charlie Chaplin, Ingmar Bergman, Orson Welles, Federico Fellini, Woody Allen, Akira Kurosawa and Je-gyu Kang exemplify one perennial question, namely, what it means to be a human. These movies blend various themes in the humanities to present the total context where a human being struggles to locate his or her own self. The plasticity of reality realised by digital languages is very welcome in the face of the recent regimentation of many disciplines in the humanities in the name of specialisation.

Digital languages could play another important role as well, namely, the role of connecting the humanities of academia with cultural humanities. Given that it is hard to expect a verbal language to fulfil such a role in an effective way, the challenge to academics is to embrace the new expressive perspectives offered by digital languages. The contemporary popular trend is moving more and more toward visual culture, distancing itself from the culture of written language. Universities cannot leave the future status of the humanities to the mercy of the cultural markets. Academics need to pay close attention to the social realities around them and offer critically balanced assessments of them, and to communicate these assessments through digitally produced academic expressions. Such digitally produced works can show people how the real humanities in academic scholarship are effective and competitive in thinking hard about the human condition.

I do not wish to suggest that verbal languages should be totally replaced by digital languages. Verbal languages will continue to be employed in the humanities to fulfil their traditional functions. They are an essential vector for the human intellectual endeavours of imagination, interpretation, analysis, criticism, discussion and synthesis. For such tasks, no more powerful language exists. It is little wonder that our predecessors insisted on the primacy of this written language and tried to improve its effectiveness.

The tradition of the primacy of verbal languages in the humanities should be maintained in the future. This needs to be emphasised in light of the fact that the tradition has been challenged from various sectors. Certainly, pluralisation of languages, and notably digital-based languages, should be accepted but not at the cost of sacrificing the primacy of verbal language. Particular topics and specialisations in the humanities should not be ignored in the age of popular digital culture and they need to be protected for the sake of the humanities as a whole.

In conclusion, it is the privilege and pleasure of practitioners of the humanities that the contemporary intellectual world is one of pluralism of knowledge and language on the one hand and that the same world consists of the solidarity of humans as a species on the other hand. Thus, it is time to consider concrete steps towards realising the new goal on a higher level for the humanities.

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