



National Humanities Center

by Geoffrey Harpham, PhD

THE HUMAN AND THE HUMANITIES

When I first arrived as Director of the National Humanities Center six years ago, I used to hear people say that the Center was “a well kept secret” in the Triangle area. This surprised me, because among academics, the Center is not a secret at all; it is well known as one of the leading research institutes in the world, and the only one—yes, the only one in the world—dedicated to supporting the humanities. Over the past thirty years, more than eleven hundred scholars have had residential fellowships at the Center. Their work has been awarded every major prize offered for scholarship, and many of them have gone on to assume leadership positions in their fields. All of them have returned to their campuses after their “year in paradise,” as some call it, to spread the word, so by this time the Center’s network is broad and deep. If the Center was a secret to anyone, it was a secret we had kept without meaning or wishing to.

One of the reasons for this involuntary secrecy, I reflected, might be that scholars are in general a quiet lot, and the relevance of their work to the issues of the day is almost invariably indirect, diffuse, and deferred. The challenge is to make real the connections between the sometimes arcane or abstruse concerns of scholars and the things that people actually care about. For the past several years, we have been making this connection through an extended, multi-layered project called “Autonomy, Singularity, Creativity: The Human and the Humanities.”

The story of how this initiative came into being is almost as interesting as the

initiative itself. It began with a very simple question, a question that lies at the core of humanistic scholarship: What is a human being? If you had asked this question of Plato, you might have heard that a man is a biped without feathers. If you had asked the same question of Thomas Aquinas, Hamlet, Immanuel Kant, Ludwig von Beethoven, Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud, Virginia Woolf, or John Maynard Keynes, you would have received eight fascinating, but very different answers. The consistent effect of profound philosophical or artistic insight is to offer new understandings of the human condition, giving us a new way of thinking about who, and what, we are.

These self-understandings are important especially today, when we have to confront, often in the most anguished contexts, questions of “human rights,” “crimes against humanity” and the “sanctity of human life.” When we add to these the issues surrounding human cloning, genetic engineering, and animal rights, it is easy to see how much depends on the definition of the human.

What forces are currently shaping our human self-understanding? Among them would have to be the many forms of empirical science that have generated remarkable new information and new ways of looking at fundamental “human” attributes such as language, social intelligence, and the emotions, as well as the new forms of biotechnology that are giving us the capacity to re-make ourselves in dramatic ways. Everywhere you look, it seems—in neuroscience, evolutionary biology, cognitive science, and primatology, to take just a few fields—new discoveries are being made that yield a radically different picture of who we are and who we might be. Our species self-understanding is changing, not because some venerable philosopher is dreaming unheard-of dreams but because of empirical work.

Four years ago, I convened a small group consisting of faculty from Duke, UNC-CH, and NC State, as well as a few other particularly fertile minds from around the country, locked them in a room for two days and asked them to

think about these issues. The memory of these sessions has remained with me ever since—the initial probing and occasional awkwardness, the gradual development of trust, the occasional tension or friction, the frustrating sense of getting nowhere, the determination to forge ahead.

At one moment, Mark Turner, of Case Western Reserve, one of the most daring and adventuresome explorers of the interface between science and the humanities, commented that there are some terms that everybody thinks they own. Creativity, for example: artists mean one thing by it, but philosophers and linguists give entirely different accounts. This comment was duly registered as an interesting but unconnected insight until, a couple of hours later, somebody else mentioned that “singularity” was another such term. Some people used the term to indicate the uniqueness of the human species, but others used it to indicate a new era when human beings, thoroughly integrated with digital technology, would become a virtually new species—a “singularity.” Still others regarded singularity as a presumption of human superiority that had produced disastrous ethical consequences in terms of our relations with other species.

So now we had two contested terms.

After another couple of hours of meandering discussion, out popped a third: autonomy, which meant either the ingrained capacity of humans to regulate and govern themselves, or a dangerous illusion that had to be discarded in an interrelated world, or a desirable goal that we had to work towards.

And suddenly, we had our eureka moment: autonomy, singularity, creativity, all key concepts in the humanities that were being reworked under the pressure of new empirical work. These three words became the title of the whole project, to which I added a less polysyllabic subtitle: *The Human and the Humanities*.

With such a promising title, we were quickly able to fashion a proposal for a three-year project that would study the ways in which new empirical work was contributing to a redescription of the human, and

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ways in which the humanities were responding to this challenge. Almost immediately, we received support from the North Carolina Biotechnology Center, the Burroughs Wellcome Fund, Duke University, North Carolina State, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Anadarko Petroleum, Center trustee James Hackett, and, most generously, the Research Triangle Foundation—over a million dollars to support fellowships, seminars, visiting speakers, lectures, and an annual conference.

As we enter the third and last year of this project, I am both excited about what lies ahead and prematurely nostalgic about its end. The project has already brought to the Triangle area over forty distinguished scientists and humanists, including some

of the most compelling figures in contemporary intellectual life—E. O. Wilson, Steven Pinker, Martha Nussbaum, Michael Pollan, and many others. This November, the conference keynote will be delivered by Oliver Sacks, who will come as a Distinguished Visitor under a program handsomely endowed by Dr. Assad Meymandi, a longtime member of the Center's board of trustees.

With each conference attended by a capacity audience of over two hundred people, the ASC initiative will have the cumulative effect of drawing attention not only to the question of the human, but also to the Center and indeed the entire Triangle area. If this means that I get a reputation for being unable to keep a secret, that's a price I'll just have to pay.

The writer is Director of the National Humanities Center, Research Triangle Park, NC. He is the former Professor of English at Tulane University.



To register for the National Humanities Center conference on “The Human and the Humanities” described in this article, contact Martha Johnson at (919) 549-0661, or at mjohnson@nationalhumanitiescenter.org.