



ARTICLES OF REASON

How Humanists Really (Ought to?) Think

THE REREADING of Kant above aims to make available, via the usual methods, propositions about the kinds of work humanist reason could entail and the kinds of scholarship it could produce. As it does so, it sets itself against the mythologized meta-discourse of humanist reason, and shows—I think—the following: (1) We can conceive of singularity not as a feature of a thing, but as a *relation* between a person and a thing, sometimes chosen for a specific purpose by a specific person, sometimes institutionalized in various social forms; singularity is not a property of either a method or an object that preexists the relation that attention (and affection) create. (2) In doing so, we collapse the absolute boundary between human and artwork, on one side, and the rest of the social life-world, on the other, and collapse, accordingly, any *ontological* justification for the protection of certain classes of objects from the depredations of capitalism or knowledge. This is a small price to pay, since it is the cost of a confrontation with the actual world we live in, and thus the payment we must make in order to address it, know it, make laws or communities within it, in common. Conceiving the Romantic/idealized notion of the human or the artwork as fundamentally a social product—and therefore as being as susceptible as anything else to the work of the social—thus calls us, collectively

and together, to labor, to the institutionalization of our modes of care around whatever objects we deem careworthy, and also, therefore, to the development of social forms of protection, democratically achieved, that would require no Romantic or otherwise idealized justification.

What remains now is to describe the principles that would figure and describe the work of the humanities in such a situation. Call them “articles of reason,” a set of organizing epistemological practices and beliefs compatible with both the actual practice of humanist scholars and with the generalized, post-Kantian vision of a world in which all relations are affectionate, and therefore the products of human interaction and choice (including interactions with and choices about the nonhuman world, living and nonliving).

Before we get started, however, a couple of questions: Given its ugly history, its allegedly direct oppositional relation to the kinds of thinking that humanists do, and its domination by science, why use the word “reason” at all to accomplish this task? And what could one usefully and legitimately mean by “reason” in the humanities today?

1. WHY REASON? WHICH REASON?

Reason is, simply, a subjective procedure for producing objective, shareable knowledge.

I take the words “subjective” and “objective” from Max Weber’s 1904 essay on objectivity in the social sciences. There, Weber is trying to figure out how to address the basic critique, which emerged from the scientific discourse of the time (and which we still know today), that because humanist reasoning seemed to be highly dependent on its individual producer and tightly bound to its analytic objects and contexts, it was necessarily “subjective,” and therefore not capable of producing the kinds of truths that the natural sciences produced. (A scientific experiment, for instance, turns out, at least in theory, the same way no matter who does it or when or where they do it, whereas two humanists addressing the “same” question in different places and times, or even in the same place and time, will produce different answers; hence, the humanities

are “subjective.” QED.) At the same time, Weber was attempting to respond to the work of Wilhelm Windelband’s student Heinrich Rickert, who had claimed that although the origins of humanist work were subjective, they aimed finally to express universal, and therefore objective, values. (Rickert would go on, sadly, to argue that the pursuit of allegedly universal values justified, as it did in the Germany of his time, the removal from society, and the murder, of those who stood in the way of that universalism. *Sic semper universalists.*) Weber, a cultural relativist, wanted to avoid axiological universals, so he needed to separate the question of universal values from the question of scientific research. He was attempting to imagine an objectivity that would be fundamentally social and cultural, an objectivity determined by the actual work and thinking of the human beings occupying social and cultural space.

Weber therefore argued that humanist work (but really all scientific work) was both subjective and objective. The questions historians seek to answer begin subjectively, he claimed, with some kind of interest generated in the present and with things that are culturally significant to them. From the vast selection of possible research questions before them, historians choose ones that reflect some measure of their own historically, technologically, and culturally conditioned interests. “Only a small portion of existing concrete reality is colored by our value-conditioned interest and it alone is significant to us,” Weber wrote.¹ We decide what to study based on what matters to us; we cannot “discover what is meaningful to us by means of a ‘presuppositionless’ investigation of empirical data,” and then begin doing research. No laws determine in advance what matters, or ought to matter, to a given group of people. These values and these interests operate in the social prior to the decision to do scientific work, which instantiates each time, therefore, the subjective conditions that make it worth doing for someone specific in a specific historico-cultural moment. The humanist’s interest in a topic, rather than making it private and closed off to others, is precisely what “opens the possibility of shareable insights and of connection to shareable experiences.” It is this possibility, alongside a connection to larger social issues, that sustains “the value of much historical and theoretical research in the humanities.”²

The answers that researchers seek once they have determined a field to explore, on the other hand, must in principle be shareable and interpersonally explainable to all members of the human community. “Systematically correct scientific proof in the social sciences, if it is to achieve its purpose,” Weber writes, “must be acknowledged as correct even by a Chinese—or—more precisely stated—it must continually *strive* to attain this goal.”³ As an extension of this (and minus the fantasy that the Chinese person is the be-all, end-all of how different someone can be from Max Weber), one might say something like this: Things that are “objective” or “true” are in principle shareable and teachable, and produced by methods that are shareable and teachable, to any other person in the social, in a reasonable amount of time; and that these things are subject to revision on the basis of future evidence, dialogue, and developments in method. That’s “objectivity.” Part of what this means is that things that are objectively determined to be true are *open* and holdable *in common*, and also changeable in common, even with effort, across the kinds of barriers of culture and language that separate us from one another. It also means that the objective and the true are fundamentally *interpersonal* (and hence, ha ha, subjective to some degree): they are so because the condition for truth is its shareability. I mean that something is “true” and the product of “reason” if and only if both the thing and the method used to determine its truthfulness are shared and dialogic.⁴ So you could explain something to me, and have me come to believe it, but over the course of that explanation and understanding, I would be able to explain the same thing back to you in a new way and have *you* come to believe it. Neither of us would end up where we started. We forge the true together. And to do so, to participate in this intertwined social process, we must of course imagine each other and make efforts, as both speakers and listeners, to understand what Weber called the “rationality” of the other, which requires some sense of one’s own rationality—some sense of how its procedures and its expression in language will strike another person and be hearable and learnable by them.⁵

In this way, we have a model for how objective knowledge, truth, can emerge from, and be the final goal of, a process that begins with a subjective decision to address a topic, and whose research may well

be influenced by that subjectivity along the way. Even if, for instance, you tell me about how you feel about something that has historically happened only once, and only to you—so I have no comparable experiential basis upon which to evaluate your telling—nonetheless you can, using a variety of processes that I can share (including the things we call “description,” “evaluation,” “logical inference,” and “symbolic interpretation”), bring me to a place where I understand what you have experienced and recognize it as objectively true, and, what’s more—even though this might be difficult—can bring to your understanding of that event some new perspective or knowledge that will alter your perspective on the nature of your own experience, and therefore alter its truth. And then you can reply to me and alter once again both our perspectives, or generate alternative and potentially undecidable ways of thinking about the event that we recognize, together, to have a degree of potential legitimacy that would have to be included in a full understanding of the truth of the event.

That’s reason—or at least a “weak and fallibilistic but non-defeatist conception of reason.”⁶ For obvious reasons, any such reason, by virtue of being bound to this goal of producing interpersonal objectivity or truth, will be profoundly interested in (1) its own rationality, because understanding oneself is a condition for understanding (and communicating with) the other; and (2) the rationality of others, because understanding others is a condition for understanding (and communicating with) oneself. These others do not have to be just our contemporaries, and not even be people at all: they can be past people, or the records of past people, records of behavior and art and literature and mythological systems and actions and events and so on, all operating not only at the scale of the individual person, but at a myriad of scales above and below it. Reason, knowing that it begins in subjectivity, will test its insights against other forms of subjectivity, against other forms of knowing (living or dead, textual or spoken), to arrive at the most socially compelling version of interpersonal truth.

As will become clear in what follows, I do not believe that this form of reason in common necessarily involves the coparticipation of a set of free, voluntary, and fully rational individuals; this is not an idealized model of the nineteenth-century public sphere. My assumption

is that the participants in reason come to that conversation in a wide range of differently embodied forms, and with a wide range of historical experiences, forms of knowledge, and experiences of power and powerlessness, oppression and dominance, ability and disability. Reason as I understand it does not require its participants to shed their identities, become purely “rational” and “unemotional” (as if!), or to abandon their bodies at the door. The participants in *any* conversation will necessarily be different, which does not mean that they cannot be treated equally. The demand of (this version of) reason is that the knowledge and experiences produced by different forms of being-in-the-world can nonetheless be held in common if the participants in the conversation can manage to attend to one another and be open to the possibility of the revision of their “own” knowledge or feelings by others. That adopting this form of generosity and openness, that being vulnerable enough to abandon a belief or admit a mistake, require a certain strength and stability—and that participants in the common will often enter that common with very different levels or forms of access to that strength and stability, thanks to the social conditions that have shaped them—may well mean that some participants in the conversation have an epistemological obligation to work to create that safety and stability for their interlocutors, or else to work harder to dismantle and destabilize the forms of strength and stability that make their own views possible. Whatever reason is in what follows, then, it is a fully anthropological and historical form, embedded in human communities that have *never failed* to know inequality, that have *never failed* to exclude from the world of reason certain kinds of views or people, and that have nonetheless also sometimes succeeded in altering the sphere of reason and the shape of the common in ways that do create the kinds of change that I am describing here.⁷

I would like to suggest to you that this definition of humanist reason-in-action, despite whatever conscious reservations you have about the idea of claiming to say “true” things when you speak or write as a scholar, or any anxiety you have about whether humanist scholarship can be “objective,” more or less describes the belief expressed by your work. You think that some things are true; you think that knowing is inevitably structured by forms of power and

violence. Nonetheless, you try to say things that are both true and not structured by those things; and sometimes you succeed because other people come to believe that what you have said is true as well. This work is dialogic and interpersonal; it does not take place in your mind alone, but rather within a context of “*intersubjectively shared* acts and contexts of meaning.”⁸ Saying so openly allows us to get past a major trap of our common-sense thinking about “true” and “objective” (as well as “false” and “subjective,” for that matter)—namely, the tendency (1) to believe that the sciences are in fact “true” and “objective” in ways that the humanities are not, a belief widely held and expressed by nonhumanists but in fact not very often by natural scientists; and (2) to respond to the projection of a positivist and stupid notion of scientific reason by rejecting the notion of reason altogether, saying, as we often do, that there is no such thing as truth because all truth amounts to an expression of power, and therefore we as humanists reject the idea of truth-seeking entirely. This seems to me to cede the ground of truth far too easily to one particular ideology of it—and to be an especially bad idea because in fact, most of us do believe that, if we are not saying true things with 100 percent certainty, then, if nothing else, we are at least trying to. If I say that the poetry of Paul Celan means this or that, has this or that effect, reflects this or that thing about the cultural context in which it emerged, or teaches this or that lesson about grieving, I am hoping in each case to make a claim that could be held to be true by others, and aiming to support that claim with methods that can be and are held by others, or, if they are new, that can be explained to others and then held and used by them in ways that will in turn change what I know. This is the humanist theory of truth. We ought to lay claim to it, and recognize and write its long and complex history, which is part of the general history of truth, full stop.

Having said all this, I wish now to lay out the basic principles of the practice of that reason. These are epistemological beliefs that govern contemporary humanist scholarship, derived not from first principles, but from the history of humanist truth-seeking and from the lessons that that seeking has learned from its engagement with the humanist evidence that it has encountered, shaped, and sometimes invented wholesale.

2. THE ARTICLES

ARTICLE 1

All Human Activity Is Context-Embedded, But Not Context-Determined. This is true at multiple scales. Any historical object or moment, any social act or feeling, takes place within a series of interlocking contexts, from the immediate and intrapersonal to the transhistorical and quasi-universal. We are all embodied in our own particular ways, at the scale of the individual; we are also embodied at larger scales, including scales of social groupings or populations, and again at the scale of the species in all its historically specific evolutionary change, and again at the scale of the universe, whose direction of time and laws of entropy require living things to organize energy in order to endure.⁹

Contexts have no total explanatory or causal power. Although much humanist scholarship aims to demonstrate the embeddedness of an object in one or more contexts, it also frequently explores the degree to which that object escapes or differentiates itself from what one might think of as a pure contextual determinism, from being merely an epiphenomenon, a supplement, or a superstructure for some other, actually important system or sequence of events. Because this escape or differentiation can acquire its significance only against that background of deterministic normality, humanist scholarship will necessarily generate (or simply assume) in its initial stages a sense of determinist, contextual enclosure—or reproduce some normative, acceptable version of that contextualization—before exploring the degrees of latitude that such an enclosure affords (or those explored or expressed by a given object, process, or event). The freedom of the humanist object or event thus has no meaning without context; freedom itself, however one defines it, will depend on a sense of the affordances of a given socio-historical sphere. Such a theory of a given sphere can then be explicitly or implicitly contextualized, placed within a larger context of contexts, which would constitute a general theory of history against which the possibilities of a given moment or situation might be measured. One of the main tasks of humanist reason is to explore the tension between freedom and context, and

thus to understand, as it rubs these patterns together at different scales of experience and being, the full, rich nature of human social experience.

One strong strain of humanist anticontextualism tends to emphasize the object's absolute capacity to transcend its context—whether, for instance, as a matter of total aesthetic relevance, as with the Romantic ideal of the transcendental artwork, or as a matter of radical historical possibility, as with Badiou's theory of the event. Both of these projects, which borrow fully from the historical metadiscourse of humanist reason, nonetheless fall within the practice of humanist reason as I am describing it here. That's because the claims they make are practically and philosophically impossible without recourse to context, since any claim for the radical capacity of a given work or art or event to breach its historical moment requires, quite simply, a strong theory of the set of possibilities of that historical moment. Practically, this means that the meaning of radical freedom cannot be gotten at, cannot be described within the history of humanist practice, without some historical description of the context from which it emerges. Radical freedom is thus itself contextualized by a strong theory of historical context, for which it serves (in someone like Badiou) as a total ontological limit. But the idea of radical possibility does not require the kind of quasi-ontological foundation that Badiou gives it.

If I believe, as humanists do, that all historical moments contain the possibility of being “surprised” by some occurrence, all I have to do in order to move that surprise “inside” the historical context is to make a general claim about the nature of human and social history: namely, that it constitutes a system so rich and complex, whose causal structures are themselves subject to such complex and figural modes of transformation, that it will almost certainly *always* include the possibility of genuine surprise.¹⁰ The surprise, the possibility of some event or activity that has not been anticipated in advance by the social normativity into which it emerges, is baked into the nature of the human experience of the historical; it is a matter of the actually existing context of human life. The evidence for such a claim includes all of actual human history until now, which is full of surprises. (But also full of essentially predictable activity; the evidence suggests

again and again that “surprise” relates to “context”; the relation between the two fields is socially determined within a larger “context,” which would itself be subject to all kinds of “surprise.”)

Here we see once again how the desire to resist a strong positivist claim about the nature of history—that everything is predictable if we just know enough, or that full social control can be achieved if we just have the right institutional and epistemological levers—leads a certain strain of humanist thought into an idealized theorization of freedom. As I’ve been suggesting, such a solution to the determinism problem cedes the name of reason too much to the positivist caricature. By responding to positivism in ethical terms, it essentially reifies the humanities/science distinction as one between ethics and reason rather than contesting the terms of rationality itself.

Against, then, a metadiscourse that insists on sharp distinctions between historical determination, on the one hand, and absolute freedom, on the other, humanist reason in practice mediates consistently between these two poles. At its least interesting, this mediating has the unconscious effect of producing facile criticism of other people’s work—the kind of easy jab you see at Q&As for not emphasizing either the determining factors or the liberated ones in the analysis of a given situation. At its best—which is most of the time—this approach to an object, whether it seeks to interpret or explain it, will adopt a rich understanding of the sociohistorical situation and its various limits and affordances at multiple interpenetrating scales, each of which can be itself contextualized in relation to the others, and which accordingly can be the subject of further macro- or micro-contextualization. Understanding one’s own position in relation to this problem, and grasping the ways in which a specific approach (especially when conventional, according to disciplinary norms) will affect one’s sense of the meaning of an action/object or the possibilities of a situation, constitute a central feature of the self-reflexivity of humanist reason, which is why humanist scholarship so often—and especially in introductions—meditates openly on such questions.

That such meditation can never cease—that there can be no definitive resolution of the relation between context and action (a totally determined context would have no action at all)—is not, humanist reason believes, a function of our contemporary lack of knowledge,

and therefore a problem to be resolved by some future predictive system of history (the fantasy of Asimov's *Foundation* series), but rather a function of the contextual embeddedness of that relation itself, the degree to which the very relation between action and context depends on a series of socio-historical and environmental forces, operating at scales from the viral to the individual to the planetary, that condition it and create, for any given moment, the conditions for understanding and explaining it.¹¹ Again, and to be plain about it: humanist reason can believe this not on the grounds that it would be "bad" or "unfree" for anyone not to, but because the analysis of the existing historical evidence suggests that to believe otherwise would be unreasonable, and because it is epistemologically "productive to wonder at the realization of what seemed virtually impossible at the time and cannot be reduced, even in retrospect, to the conditions that prepared it."¹²

This theory of the relation between context and action manifests itself in one largely unconscious but important consideration for humanist reason: the role played by historical events that did not take place. This consideration can be expressed as a strong ontological claim—something like "the nature of a historical moment includes its non-actualized possibilities"—but it can also be thought of as an epistemological principle: *understanding social activity requires a complex understanding of nonactualized possibility in it*. From this perspective, one can conclude that any historical moment (and any historical context) necessarily include as part of their momentaneity not only the explicitly articulated and lived degrees of freedom that were actually expressed by the people living at that time, but also the various degrees of affordance or possibility that were themselves never used at all, that never took place or came true. The actual historical future of any given context is not, then, its only determining factor. A full understanding of history must include the various what-ifs and if-onlys that never occurred, whose possibility actively orients our understanding of what did in fact take place at all.

Such a claim applies both to historical events and to the entire world of made objects and aesthetic activities. Any object means what it does (and acts in the social in the way it does) as a result not only of the entire world of actually existing objects that surround it and

determine it in its material immediacy, but also in relation to all the objects that could exist, or could have existed, in that same context, and remained unwritten, unpainted, or unmade. A reading of Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* makes sense only against an extrapolated imaginary of what it would have been like had she written a third novel that was formally identical to *The Voyage Out*; an understanding of the historical impact of the Mughal Empire on the Indian subcontinent can be arrived at only via some sense of what might have happened had Babur not managed to defeat Ibrahim Lodi in 1526, and the empire never consolidated itself at all.

This extension of epistemological concern to the realm of the nonactual (but nonetheless historically potentially present) does not appear as a single unstriated or unending field of possibility. "What if an asteroid had exploded the moon?" is an interesting question for historians of the solar system, but not for scholars working on the history of the *ancien régime*. In other words, the set of unchosen possibilities or untaken paths that determine the full potential of a given historical situation—that are relevant epistemologically to our understanding or explanation of it—is itself contextual. The limits of that contextualization can be discovered, or put into place, only by ongoing, self-reflexive acts of humanist reason, which in so doing generate en passant the conditions of their own legitimacy, as well as the subtending theoretical grounds of their reasoning work.

A final consequence of the general belief that all human social activity is context-embedded involves the production of knowledge itself. The feminist critique of Cartesian dualism attacked the claims that (1) the mind could act separately from its embodiment, and (2) that therefore only mind-based knowledge, freed from the trappings of its social and environmental conditions, could be truly universal. No—in fact, as any number of critics showed, mind never separates from body; and the putative universalism of the disembodied mind-concept usually turns out to be a screen for the blank and erased body (neutral, white, male) that organizes the system of knowledge from which it disappears.

All knowledge is embodied. The claim—which amounts to a step forward in the recognition of context-embeddedness—can lead, in some hands, to purified relativism: if all knowledge-production is

context- or body-bound, then no knowledge can be truly common, since it will forever be tied to the conditions of its own making. But the feminist critique, with its emphasis on embodiment, performativity, and action, did not intend to give up on the possibility of knowledge. We know that that's true because the feminists of that generation in fact believed, and knew, lots of things, and attempted again and again to say things that were true. The argument was not "All knowledge is embodied; therefore, no such things as knowledge or reason exist," but rather, "Against the claim that real knowledge emerges exclusively from disembodied minds, we assert that knowledge that emerges from bodies (and particular places, times, feelings, and other forms of subjective experience) not only *can* constitute knowledge shared in common, not only *can* be the subject of shared reasoning, but that indeed it *should*, and that any system of knowledge that does not include it amounts to a bare reproduction of patriarchal normativity." The *can* portion of this set of claims is definitively proved by the historical evidence of the last decades of humanist knowledge-production. That humanist reasoners have not fully grappled with its implications, that they remain to some extent intimidated by the fantasy of mastery implied in the theory of disembodied knowing, and that they so often reproduce it in their work and their classrooms, result both from the continued general dominance of the scientific-Cartesian imaginary and from the pressures of a certain strongly relativist humanist metadiscourse, which misrepresents, for all the reasons I've speculated on so far, the actual activity of humanist work.

ARTICLE 2

Human Life Does Not Follow Disciplinary Boundaries; Neither Does Scholarship. The evidence for: there is absolutely no way to either teach or write in the humanities today without drawing from a variety of institutionalized disciplines: minimally anthropology, literary criticism, art history, linguistics, political, social, and economic history, history of science, philosophy, sociology, and psychology, not to mention knowledge developed in those fields primarily organized around topics—namely, ethnic studies, women's, gender, or sexuality

studies, and area studies programs of various kinds, or the vast conceptual fields organized before the modern era, for which other terms (like “natural philosophy,” “rhetoric,” or non-European concepts like *wenxue*) are necessary. To be a serious scholar in any of these fields requires some knowledge of all of them. To teach a class in any of these fields requires, likewise, some occasional reference to the other disciplines, if not actual reading material from them.

Why, if this is so, do humanists in teaching and research institutions so consistently organize themselves into disciplines? Any response to this question would have to account for the reward structures produced for both individuals and the disciplines with which they identify by their bureaucratic systematization. This systematization provides, among other things, for the justification of tenure lines, the creation of disciplinary organizations like the MLA or the AHA, journals, conferences, and so on—the entire institutional apparatus of the disciplines, whose norms create realms of protection around specific topics or methods by guaranteeing that judgment about scholarly validity comes only from a group of self-chosen insiders, who can among other things be counted on to have the interests of the discipline at heart. At its worst, this produces the kind of policing behavior in which conservative scholars tell innovative ones that what they are doing “is not real history” (or whatever)—a reaction feminist scholars or ones focused on oppressed populations know all too well. At its best, such a procedure guarantees a certain disciplinary space of safety and freedom, a space whose protection can shepherd entire new fields into being (think in this context of the important roles played by programs, and then departments, of women’s or gender studies, Latina/o/x studies, African American studies, Native American studies, Asian American studies, science studies, and so on).

The justification for humanist disciplinarity is, then, almost entirely institutional: we have disciplines to protect and reify practices of humanist reason, to create institutional space for the necessary work of humanist thought, and to produce, within the institution, the room for a variety of methodological approaches to the basic questions of human social life. In this way, we might think of disciplines as a kind of ecological necessity—as spaces designed to

create epistemological biomes in which different kinds of thinking can flourish and compete, wane and grow.

Epistemologically, the danger is that the biomes become too separate, that the methods that succeed in one biome do not get countered or challenged by the evidence or methods developed in another. When that happens, the residents of one biome come to believe that they “know” what their topic is, and that only knowledge produced within the framework of their discipline can legitimately challenge it. But who among literary scholars believes that historians have an epistemological monopoly on the idea or practice of historical scholarship, or that sociologists have a monopoly on concepts that explain social life? And if literary scholars believe that, then they must also believe that they themselves have no monopoly on understanding or explaining literature; that their training in literature, though it reveals a great deal, may also obscure or ignore other ways of thinking; and therefore that the historians and sociologists may well have insights that could teach the literary folks a thing or two. Even if saying so makes you (my literary reader) feel a bit anxious, I want to suggest to you that the entire field of literary scholarship (you included) already believes this since its methodological history includes borrowing from all the other humanistic fields, including of course history and sociology, which have helped literary scholars develop better theories of their own methods and critical work.

At its simplest, the epistemological justification for interdisciplinarity is this: human life maintains no strict separations among the fields of activity whose differences define the humanist disciplines. Art does not exist in a realm wholly separate from that of literature, or of philosophy, nor does the social realm distinguish itself absolutely from the anthropological or psychological one; and none of the fields in the first group operate outside of the procedures studied by the disciplines in the second ones, which are constituted in turn by the very practices that define the ones in the first group. At some level, of course, the fields can remain separate, just as one can think of a history of painting that operates to some extent independently from the history of sculpture. But that “to some extent” is always only partial because the general social field does not know strong ontological divisions among its categories. Everything interacts. We know this

about the social because we can, using the tools of humanist reason, prove it.

It would be a mistake to imagine that seeing things this way requires deriving the epistemology of humanist reason once again from the nature of its object: because human life does not and cannot separate these fields, therefore humanist reason, which studies human life, does not and cannot separate these fields either. One can just as easily derive the object from the method: humanist reason is a way of thinking that uses a variety of epistemological and evidentiary practices to see connections across existing social boundaries; in this way, it produces a model of the social as interconnected. There is no primacy here. But the model of the social as interconnected is reasonable, in the sense that it can be the product of shared methods and shared conclusions, all of which are self-reflexively modifiable in common. It is also realistic, not insofar as it responds to something that is actually or really there (beyond some human capacity to interact with or constitute it), but because it provides a potential ground for pragmatic decisions about how to interact with the social in ways that can be socially (and personally and politically) effective.

ARTICLE 3

All Social Processes and Artifacts Result from Combinations of Primary and Secondary Causes and Contain Primary and Secondary Information. The primary/secondary distinction dates back at least to Aristotle, who distinguishes between intentional and unintentional aspects of social artifacts. A marble statue has a shape and a weight; so does a piece of marble placed on a scale at the market. In the first case, the shape is primary, the weight secondary; in the second, it's the other way around. No one cares what the marble on the scale looks like, so long as it weighs 100 drachmae, and no one cares what the marble statue weighs, so long as it looks good.

The humanist interpretation of culture recognizes the primary/secondary, intentional/unintentional division at every level of the social, seeing it as an effect of the organization of human systems and the degree to which objects and practices operate within limited fields of active, conscious awareness. This is as true for artifacts—think

of the way the shards of an Etruscan vase might teach us, by virtue of their chemical composition, about the kinds of ceramic and fire-making technologies the Etruscans possessed—as it is for processes. The hiring practices of a large corporation may not *intentionally* enact structural racism while nonetheless very much doing so. The act of cutting in line may express and participate in either the sustaining or the violation of a cultural norm without, for all that, being intentionally directed toward that sustenance or violation. A full understanding of any of these objects requires attending to the many primary and secondary forces embedded and reified in them, and requires grasping the specific relations among those forces. Something like the critique of structural sexism or racism depends, for instance, almost entirely on this kind of thinking: against a purely intentionalist theory of human activity, such a critique aims to reveal racism or sexism as a secondary effect of social processes that may well seem (or be) intentionally nonsexist or nonracist, and in so doing, make the social field as a whole responsible for recognizing those effects. Indeed one might say that systems of oppression depend in general both on the unconscious normalization of primary processes that have pernicious secondary effects (this is, in effect, ideology) and on the deliberate masking of pernicious effects as secondary (and therefore uncontrollable) consequences of perfectly reasonable primary goals (as in, for instance, the development of seemingly neutral rules for the provision of social services whose ultimate consequences are to deny those services to members of certain groups, a practice known in the United States as “redlining”).

Another place to witness the active use of the primary/secondary distinction comes in the interpretive procedure known as “close reading.” In contrast to the hermeneutics associated with the interpretation of holy texts, in which the effort is to radically determine the primary intention of the text—to create through the work of reading an object for which there is, in effect, no secondary information at all, but only primary or true meaning on the one hand, and illegitimate or blasphemous meaning on the other—secular hermeneutics almost always moves beyond the primary or intentional level of the source text in order to determine what the reading effort conceives of as its “full” semiotic field of production. I am not sure what

Cleanth Brooks thought John Keats thought of the urn poem, but the reading Brooks performs in no way requires, for its intelligibility, the idea that Keats intended everything Brooks sees; what's more, such a demand would be effectively impossible since Keats could not know everything Brooks knows, including, for instance, the history of poetry after Keats. The New Critical emphasis on the work of the "text" rather than on the author is a kind of theoretical expression of this mode of reasoning; the meaning and social force of a textual object do not depend on the intentions in it, but rather on the total activity produced by the interactions between its various processes of possible meaning—figural, literal, symbolic, structural, patterned, aural, visual, narrative, grammatical, and so on—none of which need be under the full intentional control of an original author. The same basic principles govern the humanist interpretations of social processes and historical events.

Any number of theoretical models exist to subtend the basic belief in the epistemological distinction between intentional and unintentional cultural and historical activity. These include the various theories of ideology, which explain the various large-scale mediatic (fake news), architectural (the classroom), interpersonal (the Althusserian appeal), professional (the vocation), or institutional nongovernmental (the church) or governmental (the law) processes that modify what one might think of as the very structure of intention itself, revealing it, in some cases, to be essentially secondary and unintentional in the Aristotelian sense. This goes as well for psychological theories of the unconscious, which describe a level we conceive as being "below" the self, and for sociological or anthropological theories of culture, which describe a level we conceive as being "above" the self. They also go, though more tendentially, for claims one might make about evolutionary or ecological processes, both those that drive the specific development of the human species and those operating "below" (in the realm of viruses and the like) and "above" (in the various Eocenes) the specific scales of human life and human culture. All of these amount to forms of secondary, unintentional activity that can and must be included in any understanding or interpretation of human social life, whether that interpretation be focused on matters historical, aesthetic, sociological, or philosophical, all of which must

be understood contextually in terms of the actually existing sense that the human actors under consideration have of their own intentional motivations, without which the secondary levels would have nothing to act on, and therefore no significance.

In each of these theories of secondary activity, the very distinctiveness of the primary-secondary division is itself at stake, either in the mode of total confusion, as in the psychoanalytic reading of a behavior that feels in every way intentional but is also, at some other level, the unstoppable repetition of an earlier trauma, or in the mode of radical reversal, as when one or another theorist of ideology comes to argue that we do not so much perform individuality as individuality performs us—that in effect our sense of intentionality is in fact the secondary product of a system designed to produce efficient social subjects. (This is essentially the plot of *The Matrix*.) Every investigation of these kinds of distinctions thus contributes to a broader history of the primary-secondary relation, as well as to an extensive humanist metadiscourse on the subject. In keeping with the general practices of humanist self-reflexivity, the theories born of that metadiscourse will inevitably be measured against a variety of actually existing instances, whose understanding will be modified by that theory even as they also potentially modify the theory in turn.

The complexity of this humanist metadiscourse is not socially unique. Humanist reasoners are not the only people to recognize the primary/secondary distinction even if, like everyone else, we live most of our lives imagining that what we are doing is essentially intentional, while other people are motivated by ideology, or their controlling father, or whatever else. The distinction between primary and secondary is instead adjudicated on a quotidian basis at nearly every level of culture, including perhaps most obviously that of the idea of social control, whether such control is a matter of “the government telling you what to do”; some theory of historical cyclicity or the ages of humankind; kismet, fate, karma, or some other quasi-theological process; or simply some idea of “personality” as a determining factor in an individual person’s choices at any given juncture. Even a word like “coincidence” exists in part as a function of the primary/secondary distinction: its social purpose is to assert that some event does not in fact have some more fundamental and primary

“intention” behind it, but rather is the product—like the weight of the marble in the statue—of an essentially unintentional historical process, to which no significant hermeneutic or social attention need be paid. (One might think of paranoia, in this context, as an epistemological mode that aims to collapse all meaning into primary intentionality; you think that X is meaningless, but if you understand the true nature of reality, you will discover that X is full of secret meaning! Also: everything is X!!!)

The primary/secondary distinction as made in humanist reason corresponds, then, with a more general process of the organization of social life, in which knowing what is primary and what is secondary helps one figure out what to do and how to get by, and how to interpret objects, sentences, actions, and so on. The operations of primary and secondary meaning depend on an accurate apprehension of the context of the event, social process, or object under consideration. Knowing whether the piece of marble was made to serve in a temple or at the market square, having some broader sense of the general sphere of cultural production, the relative cost of marble and the labor to carve it, the social function and shape of other statues or weights, and so on—all of these are critical to a general projection onto the object of its primary and secondary features, not only for the cultural historian of the marble’s future, but also for the actually existing visitor to the market where it is being used. Within certain specialized social realms, like that of the aesthetic, we may also confront the deliberate confusion of primary and secondary meaning, the using of this distinction in aesthetic production, and therefore the motivation of that feature of sociocultural activity in the work of art—as might happen if, for instance, someone made a statue of Margaret Thatcher out of material that weighed, once sculpted, exactly the same as Margaret Thatcher did.

Such work serves to remind us that all the cultural processes that humanist reason uses are themselves potential subjects of both primary and secondary, intentional and unintentional, and cultural practice, and that all these processes belong, therefore, differentially to primary and secondary levels of the cultural context under examination. This is as true for the marble statue of Thatcher as it is of the sly politesse of those colonial subjects described by Homi

Bhabha, whose civility functioned as primary, and intentional, for one audience, and as unintentional—here in the sense of forced or demanded—for another, even if that second audience was sometimes only the self.

ARTICLE 4

Human Social Life Is Not Flat; Scales Are Complex, Overlapping, and Porous. The rise to prominence of computational analysis in literary studies in the last two decades, often under the general heading of digital humanities, has produced an extensive humanist metadiscourse around the idea of scale, as a discipline associated most prominently with the epistemo-ethically conceived practice of close reading has attempted to fight off a challenge posed to that practice on an epistemological level by the large-scale computational analysis of texts. Much of this debate, which begins around Franco Moretti's provocative coinage of the term "distant reading" in 2001, falls into patterns that resemble in every way the debates between the positivist and antipositivist humanists of the German *Methodenstreit*: on one side the protectors of sacred objects and ethical relationality to the other, defenders of the unique and the free, and on the other the imposers of hierarchy and subordination, the erasers of human difference, the totalizers and dominators. Alongside these essentially ethical claims come a series of more explicitly epistemological ones, which amount to the computational side asserting, on the basis of its scholarly research, that the work it does tells us something interesting about literature, and the anticomputational side asserting, in response, that such analysis only confirms, albeit in a different language, stuff that everyone already knows.

As Ted Underwood has argued, the specific use of computational methods or statistical analysis seems less characteristic of these recent critical shifts than a more general move toward large-scale, syncretic approaches, one frequently accompanied by critiques of the historical dominance of close reading and of the effects of close reading on the kinds of questions one could possibly ask about literature.¹³ An epistemological defense of that set of ways of thinking

would not have to defend (or even mention) computation at all, but rather could focus on the historical tradition of work that would include the midcentury structuralism of either the French (Claude Lévi-Strauss) or American (Talcott Parsons) type, or the kinds of thinking about literature done by Northrop Frye or Erich Auerbach, or indeed anyone who has ever made claims about the general history of the novel, or again the *longue durée* historicism of the Annales school, and so on. But even such a defense would have to contend with the fact that many of the forms of analysis one thinks of as involving heavy emphasis on uniqueness or particularity—close or psychoanalytic or deconstructive reading in literary studies, micro-history or microsociology, the ethnography or the case study—do not simply abandon the larger scale in favor of a kind of raw description, but rather arrive at exceedingly large-scale claims through what one might think of as, recalling Kant, a form of reflecting judgment that moves from the case to the general lesson, the single poem to the philosophical insight, the cheese and the worm to the entire life-world of early modern Italy, all of these local variations on the great adventure that leads from the particular to the universal. What we appear to be dealing with, then, is not a battle between one side that favors large-scale analysis and another that doesn't, but rather a battle between two (or more) methods that balance the relations among evidence, generalization, particularization, and exemplification in different ways. A full description of close reading or structuralism as a method would have to begin with serious observation of the patterns and structures of the active work of truth-production in a representative sample of the evidence (scholarship widely recognized to be doing close reading, for instance) in order to begin to make general claims about the kinds of scalar relationships that such a practice typically uses, and the patterns that govern its holding steady of certain categories at certain scales and not others.

What follows thus develops a theory of humanist scale designed to escape the caricatures of the idiography/nomothetism division on which so much humanist metadiscourse has rested since the *Methodenstreit*. To do so, I focus on a series of arguments about scale that take place in the discipline of human geography, a sociological field where the conversation about scale has been going on for several

decades, and in which it has achieved something of a full poststructuralist (or even post-poststructuralist) expression. That this expression resolves none of the fundamental philosophical problems we have seen in our analysis of Kant—that it in fact mostly reproduces them, as it drives asymptotically to nominalism—suggests how much the epistemological metadiscourse of the humanities has to gain by thinking its way out of the Windelbandian inheritance, away from some of the forms of casual poststructuralism that subtend it in contemporary academic life. The exposition of those forms, as well as the tracking of a path forward, require a level of attention and citation that mean that the next pages resemble—more than those of the other articles—the style (and length) of a more traditional and less encomial piece of scholarship.

* * *

A beginner's discussion of scale in human geography launches us immediately into a domain of interest, and trouble. I quote from an entry on "scale" written by D. R. Montello in the 2001 *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*. In a lucid exposition, the entry differentiates between "analytic" scale, the scale at which something might be described, and "phenomenon" scale, which refers "to the size at which human or physical earth structures or processes exist, regardless of how they are studied or represented." "Numerous concepts in geography," reads the text, "reflect the idea that phenomena are scale-dependent or are described in part by their scale."¹⁴

Although phenomenon scale is from this point of view a property of an object, although it is independent—insofar as anything can be—from the scholar who describes it, and thus exists "regardless of how" the object is "studied or represented," Montello nonetheless notes that it is widely agreed that "the scale of analysis must match the actual scale of the phenomenon." Scale in this way is a property of an object that produces an epistemological demand on the observer; good observation will entail observing scale and then adjusting one's observational tools to match the scale at which the object "takes

place.” “Identifying the correct scale of phenomena is” thus, Montello writes, “a central problem for geographers.”

The delightful qualities of this last sentence stem from the combination of its nearly obvious correctness and how deeply it puts the reader epistemologically in the shit. If you think that objects *exist* at a certain scale, and you believe that your heuristic tools must be appropriate to that scale, then it makes a whole lot of sense to start by figuring out at what scale something actually *takes place*. But you can’t figure out at what scale it takes place unless you are using some kind of tool . . . which ought to be appropriate to the scale, which you don’t know.

Of course, it will turn out, first, that there can be plenty of argument about the actual scale of a geographical object or process (and thus the methods appropriate to it); and second, that most objects—the family, for instance—that might be said to exist and to operate at certain scales of social or spatiotemporal activity, that in fact might be scales of their own, turn out to be analyzable at an epistemologically gregarious variety of smaller and larger scales (the individual person; the neighborhood). This would seem, then, to suggest that some if not all phenomena operate at more than one scale at the same time, at which point “identifying the correct scale of phenomena” becomes a pretty tricky problem. All this happens well before you stumble across the tried-and-true Kantian objection that we cannot know the phenomena prior to the heuristic in any case. At that point, we might as well conclude that the objects of our analysis are as much the products of our methods as the putative sources of them.

This kind of metareflection on the processes of cognition forms part of the self-reflexive epistemological toolkit of humanist reason today. How do you know that some aspect of your observation is not influencing what you observe? The problem is intractable at every level, although it seems easier at the individual level than at the cultural one;¹⁵ at the far end, the influences of society or the observer’s position within it, its era and its relation to other eras, and the capacities and predilections of its species-type bind the observing-machine (human or otherwise) to its various observations—a binding whose first-order good is to decide (or rather to make it seem to be decided

in advance) what it means for something to be deemed observable at all. In short, people fit objects in the world to the shape of the tools in their toolbox.

None of this means that the objects of the humanities or the social sciences are just figments of their methods, mere projections of the subjective position of their observers. But it does mean that no heuristic concept (or the method to which it is attached) can achieve the seemingly full-blown ontological separation from its objects that counts as one of the major triumphs of the natural scientific process. Wrongly! Humanists cede the ground too easily, as for example when they refer to race as a “social fact” in order to emphasize its material and historical force, despite the fact that it has no genetic basis. Implicitly, then, the genetic fact is simply a real fact, a factual fact, a fact whose facticity need not be managed with an adjective. To speak this way is to promulgate a theory of facticity that significantly disadvantages the claim of the humanities to relevance. Perfectly understandable, in these scientific times, but: not true.

The inability to separate the heuristic from its object may well feel—especially when one imagines those epistemologically satisfied scientists over there in the fancy new campus building—like a lack, or a loss. It isn’t, really, if you consider that we never had the certainty in the first place. The feeling of nostalgia or loss for something that one has never had, a kind of psychic retrojection that organizes both the wound and its potential healing, is for me one of the major lived forms of the experience of Lacanian lack. That same pivot, in which something imagined or thrown forward, *vorgestellt*, standing in front of us as a possible solution to our ills, invents an original plenitude, “*nachgestellt*,” set behind us, in the putatively lost or abandoned past, is one of the major mechanisms behind tragic theories of modernity or humanity more broadly; it is the droning echo of the third chapter of Genesis (which is itself an echo of an earlier drone). The fact is that concepts operate always *inside* the conversation that they are also *about*; objects always are *about* the conversation that they appear to be *inside*. Humanist reason can have no metaphysics of method.

Though we all “know” this, concepts will tend with time (as anyone who has used one knows) to become metaphysical, hardening their objects into ideas that, like Platonic forms, seem prior to the

things they describe. This idealizing or generalizing detachment from an original set of generating objects is in fact what we mean by the concept of “concept” in the first place; “concept” is an ingathering (from *con-*, together, and *-capere*, to take) that is also a kind of withdrawal from the material with which it begins.

So also with scale, a concept whose splitting into the categories of “phenomenon” and “analysis” attempts to manage *internally*, inside the concept itself, the distance between the thing and its conceptualization by attributing to both concept and thing the property of having a scale. Scale in its practice in humanist reason is thus both a concept and a metaconcept, insofar as it represents to us not only a theory of objects and a theory analyses, but an argument for the relation *between* objects and analyses, grounded in the claim that they both “have” scale. To conceptualize via scale is thus to embark on a kind of interpretive work that begins from the idea that “the scale of analysis must”—or more minimally, that it *can*—“match the actual scale of the phenomenon.”

Is the scale in the object or in the analysis? What kinds of ontological claims does the assertion that things happen “at” a scale make about the nature of things? A 1992 essay by Neil Smith, a near-classic in the field, presents a “schematic and exploratory” discussion of a sequence of scales—body, home, community, urban, region, nation, and global—that describes the ways scale produces and is produced by social effects.¹⁶ Scale “contains social activity,” Smith writes, “and at the same time provides an already partitioned geography within which social activity *takes* place.”¹⁷ Scale does not rise above the social activity that it produces; it is rather a ground for social activity, an active reflector of and site for contestation over social power and social control. A given social scale—that of the body, the family, or the city—is thus the temporarily fixed *expression* of political and social work, as well as the frame into which social and political work will tend to flow.

Smith’s decision to see scale as an operative force in the production of social space—to recognize, that is, a concept like the nation as having scalar properties similar to those of, say, the body or the globe—resolves the ontology/method question by grounding the method firmly in the phenomenon. For Smith, “scale” describes the ways in

which social force (personal or impersonal, from above or below) organizes social space into “nested” units that contain and manage social activity in both institutional terms (as when a city government reports to a regional government) and cognitive ones.¹⁸ Actors can combat the ideological fixities of scale by “scale jumping,” Smith argues, which alters their appeals or frames of action to reframe disputes or rescale spatial concepts that govern common sense.

Smith’s essay was careful, already in 1992, not to reify scales, not to turn them into fixed or transhistorical features of human social life. “The point is precisely not,” Smith writes, “to ‘freeze’ a set of scales as building blocks of a spatialized politics, but to understand the social means and political purposes through and for which such freezing of scales is nonetheless accomplished—albeit fleetingly” (66). No scale, therefore, is a mandatory expression of human social life; nor is any single scale, or system of scales, socially permanent or immutable. Scale is instead “actively produced” in the social (67), and, as the idea of jumping scales suggests, movement between scales tends to simply involve local increases in the *degree* of friction between two recognized social orders, and not a significant shift in *kind* between two ontologically incompatible worlds. In this sense, scale bears little philosophical resemblance, despite the language of “nesting” and even “hierarchy,” to the fixed and ontologically separate concentric circles of the Ptolemaic universe.

At least theoretically. Practically, however, it turns out that the use of scalar analysis as a method in geography will tend, just as the social does, to reify and fix social reality at a variety of normalized scales, thus reproducing the problem of scalar ideologies of control at the level of critical method itself. If, for instance, you describe the action of a community organization as a function of its integration into a higher system of boroughs or neighborhoods, you will potentially naturalize the former as the ontological or political subsidiary of the latter, as an epiphenomenon rather than a lever of genuine political force. As a result, a system of scalar analysis designed to emphasize the articulation and frangibility of the social can rapidly take on a functionalist, deterministic mien, as its categories of analysis harden into their Platonic near-equivalents and its hierarchies freeze into images of the way things must always be.

In response to this inevitable process, in which the invention of a powerful new tool of analysis is followed by a subsequent awareness of its normalizing reification, the last several decades have seen a variety of attempts to adjust the terminologies associated with scale, to remake it, or, more recently, to get rid of the concept entirely. These critiques have tended to accuse Smith of having failed, despite his caveats, to fully extricate his work from the problems of conceptual reification. Adam Moore, for instance, writes that “scales in Smith’s theoretical framework continue to be treated as discrete, hierarchically spatial levels—concrete ‘platforms’ of space around which daily life and political action are organized—and these very material and real scales serve as the central ‘metric of geographical differentiation.’”¹⁹ When “material and real” scales become abstracted into an “analytic framework,” Moore argues, they cease to describe the real, and instead begin to “exist apart from” the processes they actually attempt to describe.

Critiques like Moore’s proceed along a number of connected lines. Beginning often with Smith, they move quickly to address a number of bad habits in the widespread use of scale by geographers. Some writers, they show, collapse all scales into local-global binaries; others, including Smith, tend to imagine scales at “higher” levels (the global, for instance) as *causes* of activity at the “lower” ones (e.g., globalization makes a local grocery store close, but the store closing does not make globalization); still others make scale too abstract, theoretical, or reified to account for real-world political engagement and activity. By the early 2000s, some critics begin (like Moore) to reject the idea that scales are necessarily (or ever) hierarchical or nested; others argue that scale needs to reach beyond the political and economic to ecological or affective regimes. Others, drawing on the work of Manuel Castells or Bruno Latour, present alternatives involving “flow” or “network” models that emphasize travel across and over the entities formerly known as scales—reduced, in such conceptions, to speed bumps in a generally fluid and frictionless social sphere.

Seen from the outside, these critiques respond to intellectual shifts larger than the discipline of geography alone. They belong to the longstanding metadiscursive tradition of Windelbandian idiographism, with all its suspicion of positivism and subordination in

science. More immediately, they correspond to the broader integration of the poststructuralist critique of structuralism into the humanities and social sciences, whose criticism of top-down, hierarchical thinking itself belongs to the longer idiographic tradition.²⁰ And here, lest one miss the forest for the trees, it is important to recognize that the impact of poststructuralist thought depends, at this late date, not on the influence of any single thinker or text, but rather on the generalized acceptance (among a certain crowd, to be sure) of a number of tropes of poststructuralist influence. Such figures constitute the variety of subtheoretical or subconceptual habits and preferences that alter the way scholars think, write, and talk about their work. They operate in a number of linked critical modes, most of which echo Windelbandian themes:

1. An intense distrust of typology and pattern analysis, especially in its synchronic, fixative varieties, which one sees in the preference (via Giddens in sociology, for example) for a term like “structuration” over “structure.”
2. An emphasis on the irreducible, idiographic quality of the singular instance or example, perhaps best emblemized in literature by the continued dominance of close reading, but more generally in the preference for evidence drawn from lived experience, everyday life, anecdotes, or, at largest, a single “case.”
3. A preference for plural concepts over singular ones, for the multiplication of concepts across horizontal fields of differences, seen in the drive to theorize multiple modernisms or modernities, to posit transnationalisms, or the existence of many Asias, Africas, Americas, and so on. “There was not just one X; there were many Xs” is a thesis sentence that has launched thousands of humanist projects.
4. A distrust of “vertical” patterns of causality (and therefore of subordination), and an emphasis on the epistemological power of the “ground” or the “bottom-up,” conceived as that which can uniquely escape the organizing logics of dominance, whether in language or in sociopolitical activity.
5. An investment in complexity over simplicity, especially forms of complexity that demonstrate difference inside fields of similarity,

and thus serve to destabilize normative categories of whatever kind. As a first sentence in a response to a talk at MLA or AHA, “I actually think it’s more complicated than that,” will produce instant nodding among the other people in the room, even though they do not yet know what kind of complexity you’re about to talk about. The belief in complexity is visceral.

6. A strong preference for transactionality across what otherwise might be thought of as separate levels (vertical) or realms (horizontal) of the social field, visible for instance in the transnational turn in literary studies (for which “nation” serves as the derided, deconstructed term), or in queer theory (“gender,” “sex,” “male,” “female,” “normal,” and so on).²¹

Together, these overlapping positions amount to a set of epistemological habits or preferences that dominate the contemporary meta-discourse of humanist reason. I’ll call them, for short, by their modes of preference: (1) diachrony, (2) idiography, (3) plurality, (4) experience, (5) complexity, and (6) transactionality. These tropes appear both in what one might think of as the foreground of academic work that argues about scholarship, where they do explicit battle against the nomothetic, the totalizing, or the structural. But they also operate as a kind of background noise, serving as grounds for preference in book or conference titles, as patterns belonging to a general humanistic rhetoric of truth and seriousness; and most important, as unstated warrants for epistemological claims about the nature of valid concepts, or, for that matter, of reality.

It is both as background and as foreground that they sustain the critique of scale in geography. Look at the conclusion of a Richard Howitt essay on scale, where a general review of the history of the concept is coming down, in the final lines, to a series of explicit criticisms and prescriptions whose metaphorical and conceptual wardrobe I have placed in italics:

“Scale” is rendered most meaningful in its development as an *empirical generalization*—a concept made real by *building up* an understanding of complex and dynamic relationships and processes *in context*. As a theoretical abstraction the risk is that “scale”

is reduced to a set of *meaningless labels* that say something about size and complexity, but which hide precisely the *terrain* with which critical geopolitics is most interested—the terrain of *real landscapes* in which spaces of engagement offer a *myriad* of transformational opportunities at a *myriad* of scales. What is paradoxical, perhaps, is not the nature of scale, but geographers' efforts to theorize scale in some way that *divorces itself from its geographical context*. If the role of our theory is to better equip us for *our situated engagement* in struggles for justice, sustainability, and transformation, then theory *divorced* from scaled landscapes of change is probably of limited value.²²

Howitt's conclusion pulls together a number of themes developed earlier in his essay. To each theme, we may assign one (or more) of our poststructuralist tropes, noting how Howitt's interest in "building up"—the assumption that building up is epistemologically good, that it is the proper way to construct a concept—depends for its force on the presumptively good qualities of the idiographic and the experiential; seeing that the plurals in "landscapes" and the two "myriads" emphasize the internal multiplicity of experiential "terrain"; observing how a phrase like "meaningless labels" and the references to "divorce" (as against "engagement") give us a vision of abstraction as always potentially disconnected (high, loose, top-down, irresponsible) from its putative objects. These various critiques of the airiness of concepts and the seemingly paradoxical demand that stems from them appear *in nuce* in the conclusion's first sentence, where the catachresis "empirical generalization" stands in for an entire program of binding the concept fully to the ground that it conceptualizes—without losing the capacity to use concepts at all.

At some level, one wants to say, Howitt is just arguing, in a slightly more prescriptive tone than I have here, that methods cannot escape their objects. Any theory of something will inevitably have the touch of that something it theorizes about it; and the method will carry with it an implicit and shaping notion of the thing it interprets. This implies that all theories are "grounded" or "built up," so long as one conceives the level of the actual or the real as (conceptually) lower than that of abstractedness or thought.

But to say that the concepts *should not* leave their objects behind, that they *ought to* draw from and remain connected to the grounds that generate them (which Howitt is doing), is not exactly the same thing as saying that they *cannot* do so (which I am doing). From the point of view of the latter claim, it is possible to forget that one's concepts are shackled to the examples, but it is not possible to unshackle them in the first place. "Should" doesn't really come into it. And from this more neutral perspective, one might also observe, as we do with hammers and nails, that it is not clear that the examples can unshackle themselves from the concepts either. The interaction between object and method goes both ways; it's not (or not necessarily) just a question of the hammer's inevitable violation of the nail's integral quiddity, its abstraction of the nail's proper terrains of possibility, but also of the interpellative call that the nail makes, simultaneously with its appearance, to the hammer, of the ways in which that call just as surely violates the hammer's various other potential uses. Hammer and nail birth each other as much as chicken and egg; it's not clear why one should be "lower" than the other, or rather, why we should conceive them as such. The same goes for concepts and things, neither of which exist in the social lifeworld prior to a mindful distinction between them. There is no human thinking without concepts, and there never has been. There is no prehistorical moment (*pace* Rousseau) at which thought emerges into the human lifeworld from an outside, interrupting the peaceful ignorance of a pure and instinctual relation to nature.

That is not, however, what Howitt seems to believe. His critique of scale organizes itself around a binary logic in which one side of the term, the low or the grounded, the actual, is heavily privileged as a moral and political good. The flow of influence between object and method *should* go only one way. This privileging reframes, in a moment of profound irony, the entire conceptualization of scale itself in vertical terms. The way you know that scale is bad, that is, is because it hierarchizes something that should not be hierarchized. Why should that something not be hierarchized? Because it is *lower on a hierarchy*: a "ground," a "terrain," lower and therefore more epistemologically legitimate than higher things. "Ground" is *already and in advance* a member of a scalar hierarchy whose privileged term is not *high* but *low*.

It seems to me that it is precisely here, in places like these lines from Howitt, that one sees humanist metadiscourse failing to reckon with its actually existing practice.

The critique of scale Howitt develops thus aims to reframe or retheorize the term, to resolve its conceptual reification, by returning it to a “real” the geographer takes as ontologically primary, as itself an as-yet-unreified domain of thought, of lived experience, of multiplicity, and of historical change. We see something of the same value system in another major critique of geographic scale, in which Sallie A. Marston, John Paul Jones III, and Keith Woodward propose doing away with the concept entirely. Against attempts to reimagine scale as horizontal, or models that replace scale with flow, they argue for a “flat ontology” oriented toward “sites,” which would account both for the “varying degrees of organization” of social space, as well as the “virtual” potentialities for change, “dynamic collections of potential force relations and movements.”²³ Consider the following sentences:

For one encounters these “structures” [that organize juridical life] not at some level once removed, “*up there*,” in a vertical imaginary, but on *the ground*, in *practice*, the result of marking territories *horizontally* through boundaries and enclosures. (420, my emphases)

In a flat (as opposed to horizontal) ontology, we discard the *centering essentialism* that infuses not only the *up-down vertical imaginary* but also the *radiating* (out from here) spatiality of horizontality (422, my emphases)

A flat ontology must be rich to the extent that it is capable of accounting for socio-spatiality as it occurs throughout the Earth without requiring prior, *static conceptual categories*. (425, my emphases)

Sites thus require a *rigorous particularism* with regard to how they assemble precisely because a given site is always an *emergent* property of its interacting human and non-human inhabitants. . . . That is, we can talk about the existence of a given site only insofar as we can follow *interactive practices* through their *localized connections*. (425; first, third, and fourth emphases mine)

When it comes right *down* to it, a flat ontology helps theorists “keep in *touch* with the states of affairs [we purport] to describe” (Schatzki 2002, xix). And if . . . we lose the beauty of the “whole thing” when we downcast our eyes to the “*dirt and rocks*,” at least we have the *place*—the only place—where social things *happen*, things that are *contingent, fragmented and changeable*. (427, my emphases)

Against the various errors of scale, flat ontologies of sites stay in “touch” with the “ground” where “social things happen,” where pluralities of “practices” and “connections” operate locally and transactionally. Against the temporal fixity of the scalar view, sites are dynamic, diachronically changing, “emergent” and dispersed, uncentralizable. Such sites require “a rigorous particularism” that reflects their own relentless particularity, their singular internal multiplicity, the complexity of their forms of connection and self-connection, and social being; they orient us toward (warm, human, lived) place, away from space, away from modes of thought whose bird’s-eye views fix and frame human activity, rendering moot the possibility of historical change. Considering social activity in terms of flat ontology restores our recognition of the “contingent, fragmented and changeable” nature of human life, and thus opens up the possibility of a future we humans might decide to make unlike the present.

I will have to more to say about this engagement with history in a moment. But for now let me lay some cards more plainly on the table: these critiques of scalar models don’t make sense without their own scalar metaphors, without, either, their own bird’s-eye views of their disciplines or of the workings of the social. Howitt and Marston et al. borrow from a vertical, ground-up language to argue against bad (or, in the latter case, *any*) use of scale. This happens because their arguments are at least partially structured by a scalar conception of the relation between concretion and abstraction, in which the first is lower, smaller, and epistemologically central, and the second is higher, larger, and epistemologically secondary. This vertically organized opposition is most insistently organized around metaphors of ground (down, terrain, landscape, “dirt and rocks”), from which

theory may be only provisionally built “up” (Howitt), or may not be built up at all (Marston et al.). In this way both essays regularly describe scale as a verticalizing gesture that does injustice to the phenomenon under analysis. The latter’s quiddity is taken to be located firmly in the lived, dynamic stuff of its active emergence in time. And this stuff cannot be understood unless it is mapped within a larger hierarchical and vertical structure that organizes the very structure that describes and conceives it.

Already in Montello’s encyclopedia entry we saw the way that the attribution of “scale” to both the analysis and the phenomenon mediated, or leaped over, the ontological gap separating the idea from the thing. We encounter that same problem with Howitt and Marston et al., where the problem of scale’s distance from the ground it putatively describes is resolved by describing the conceptual sphere in scalar terms, terms that then justify jettisoning scale in favor of flatter approaches. The tendency of scale to sneak in through the conceptual back door is, as I suggested earlier, the result of the larger attempt to resolve the epistemological distance between the object and the method, while protecting the object from methodological interference. That such an attempt produces a kind of metaphorical approximation between scale (or flatness) in the real world and scale (or flatness) in the conceptual-methodological one is of no real consequence—approximation and metaphorization happen in all homologies, so no one should feel too bad about it. What’s worth noting however is that from the beginning, scale names a kind of solution to the problem of the object and the method, the observer and the observed, which has haunted humanist reason since Kant.

For Marston et al., the fact that the “macro-micro distinction in social analysis . . . enter[s] into the terrain of scale theorizing,” or that “the theoretical delineations between abstract/concrete and theoretical/empirical are often aligned with the global-local binary” (421)—that, in other words, there is an unhealthy traffic between methodological and analytic scale—is yet another reason to abandon the concept entirely. I’m suggesting that any such attempt is doomed to failure, and, moreover, that the attempt to do

so reproduces a Cartesian epistemological fantasy (with the right politics, this time) that Marston and other humanist scholars have elsewhere explicitly rejected. For evidence, we have the wild unself-consciousness of Marston et al.'s own work, whose proposal for a conceptually flat ontology generates much of its epistemological justification from the idea that social reality *is in fact ontologically flat*, and thus just as much as any unsubtle theorization of phenomenon scale begins with the notion that the nature of reality should interfere with the production of concepts about it. You're not supposed to begin your flat-ontological analysis with any "static conceptual categories," except, of course, for the concept of flatness and of a noncentering horizontality that reflects what life among the "dirt and rocks" is actually like. It seems awfully unlikely that the flat ontological approach would not, like scale, produce an unwelcome interference between object and method.

This unlikeliness owes itself not to this particular case, but to the general field of method, as I have been saying all along. Though in the case of scale or flat ontology the interference seems especially obvious since the gap between the methodological appearance of the concept and its phenomenal one must emerge from within a single word ("flat" or "scale"), the general problem of the interaction between analysis and phenomenon appears to us from the very beginnings of epistemology, as well as from the very beginning that is Montello's encyclopedia entry.

If all the examples so far seem to be worrying about the same problem, it is because, I am suggesting, first, that they *are* in fact worrying about the same problem, and, second, that such a problem is well worth worrying about. It goes to the very heart of a number of linked relations central to the problem of knowledge: method and object, concretion and abstraction, and (more broadly, if one can say so without calling the ghosts of scale down upon us) reality and perception, life and thought.

We get some sense of the way these problems have been historicized—understood, that is, as epistemological effects of human historical activity—in remarks that Edmund Husserl once made on the impact of the Galilean philosophical inheritance. Husserl contrasted

that mathematizing legacy to the nonidealized ways in which we actually live in and experience the world:

Mathematics and mathematical science, as a garb of ideas, or the garb of symbols of the symbolic mathematical theories, encompasses everything which, for the scientists and the educated more generally, *represents* the lifeworld, *dresses it up* as “objectively actual and true” nature. It is through the *garb of ideas* that we take for true being what is actually a *method*—a method which is designed for the purpose of progressively improving, *in infinitum*, through “scientific” predictions, those rough predictions which are the only ones originally possible within the sphere of what is actually experienced and experienceable in the lifeworld.²⁴

We take for true being what is actually a *method*: with these words, Husserl addresses the object-method problem to nothing less than the entire experience of life. He thus posits an initial, prescientific condition of inductive reasoning as the ground of ordinary epistemological practice—“All knowledge of laws could be knowledge only of predictions . . . which are verified in the manner of inductions”—which is then taken over by science and made into an infinite, idealized limit.²⁵ To the world of actual experience, he says, “belongs the form of space-time together with all the bodily shapes incorporated in it; it is in this world that we ourselves live, in accord with our bodily, personal way of being.”²⁶

Notice how closely these arguments, in which the lived, the body, stands as the ground of being, of knowledge, which science only potentially abstracts, idealizes, or “represents,” align themselves with Howitt’s and Marston et al.’s critiques of scale. Living is not a “method.” Like Heidegger’s Greek temple or Kant’s work of art, it gives itself the law; it inhabits itself in an in-dwelling. And so whatever method we use to think of what living is, it will hardly be a “method” in the Cartesian sense. The method will owe—if we are interested in aligning our methods with our phenomena—something to the ontological nature of the phenomenon as we conceive it. In this way, the debates about scale, on every side, are also debates about the nature of human life itself, about the properties—temporal, spatial,

social—and forms of organization and articulation—nested, networked, embedded, emergent—of the human lifeworld. “The scale of analysis must match the actual scale of the phenomenon.” Yes, one sees how you would come to think so. And how, if you did, “identifying the correct scale of phenomena” would become “a central problem” for the humanistic disciplines.

But what if you said instead something like, “The scale of analysis must understand and include the primary social scale of the phenomenon, while recognizing that this primary social scale does not, in fact, constitute the full reality of the phenomenon, and that doing justice to a phenomenon does not (and quite literally cannot) entail reproducing it at the epistemological level”? That’s a mouthful, I know, but it corresponds to how humanist reason actually works.

Husserl’s critique of mathematical science makes it clear that one humanist way to conceive of “bad” (scientific, dominating) epistemology is as a specifically *historical* disaster. Prior to the Scientific Revolution, Husserl says, the analytic ideology of the everyday lifeworld essentially operated in accordance with that world’s living actuality. Modern science presents itself as a realistic way of seeing things, disguising the fundamental truth that it is a “method” with only a restricted purchase on the variety of life. Human (or European) history after the Scientific Revolution thus amounts to a dislocation or disruption in the phenomenon, a kind of excess or supplement that can and ought to be removed from consideration of the phenomenon’s ontology. The old phenomena are still there, beneath the conceptual armature; only the Scientific Revolution has oriented us toward this new set of phenomena or caused us to reimagine the already-existing stuff as “scientific” phenomena. Such a theorization of the phenomenon as *that which appears in the lifeworld prior to its conceptualization in modern science* amounts to a philosophy of history—an argument about the proper historical relationship between human activity and human being.²⁷ In it, the ontology of the lifeworld has been flat all along and is simply waiting to be revealed to us for a second time (a second time that would also be, of course, a first).²⁸

But: how would you know? What possible ground could guarantee the ontology of the phenomenon long enough to generate an analytic method proper to it? This is more than just a claim about

the cross-contamination of methods and objects. It is, rather, an observation that in all these cases, the entire structure of critique is sustained by the holding steady of figures that are not subject to the process of analysis applied to everything else. No matter how flat your ontology is, the frontier that it does not breach is that of flatness itself; it does not think the role flatness plays in expressing the distinction between concretion and abstraction that justifies it. So let me say it as plainly as I can: “flatness” is an abstraction. “Ground” is an abstraction; “terrain” is an abstraction; the body that science idealistically “dresses up” is an abstraction; “life” is an abstraction. The idea that somehow these things are certainly, ontologically concrete, that they constitute reality, the lifeworld, in any simple way, that they are “flat”—that they can serve as the unshakeable source of both *evidence* and *interpretation*, that, in short, they produce the final marriage of analysis and phenomenon—is an expression of an understanding of poststructuralism that does not go far enough. (In this way, it constitutes also, and ironically, simply a mirror image of Cartesian dominance.)

If every “concrete,” phenomenal object can be recognized as an abstraction—which it can—then it is also true that every abstraction can also be understood, from another perspective, as a concretion. “Ground” concretizes concepts like space, landscape, or terrain; it phenomenalizes them by orienting them toward an inductively more physical regime (I am avoiding the term “level,” though without much hope for my conceptual purity in the long run); “the body” concretizes (differently from “a body” or “bodies,” let us note) a mixture of social activity, intellectual and emotional experience, and spatial force (among other things), binding them temporarily in an intuitively sensible package. And life is, from a certain perspective, the concretion of one of many kinds of species-being (another major one of which is, of course, death). The process whereby concepts and abstractions pass into one another depends, it does not go without saying, not simply on “perspective,” but on a process of orientation including embodied orientation, an orientation that is— if one proceeds through a certain analysis—emergent, discontinuous, dynamic, and so on. There is no thinking and no language, no human social life, no humanist reason or humanist scholarship, that

does not rely on this concretion/abstraction dynamic.²⁹ Humanist epistemology ought to begin by seeing that dynamic not as a problem to be overcome, but as *already an overcoming*, already a solution to the challenge posed to us in our species-being by the dynamism and multiplicity that characterize our (experience of the) world.

It is not, therefore, a question of restoring to the discussion of scale a proper hierarchy—a hierarchy that would be proper to it, in which the presumptive opposition between the flat and the scalar, the ground of life and the abstraction of theory, would regain all its perpendicular glory. We do not have scales “after all.” It is rather a matter of observing, and tracing, the fold that brings together, continuously and discontinuously, in precisely the moment of a disavowal, the flat and the scalar, the lived and the thought, the object and the method. Continuously and discontinuously: because in the very act of asserting a total ontological continuity among the human and nonhuman objects of the world, thought—scale—emerges as a discontinuity, a rupture, a potential violation of continuity precisely insofar as it becomes a resistance to it. Scale, like all thought, *discontinues*: it breaks away from, leaps above, escapes the field of the (putative) real, inserting into the field of play a concept that claims an impossible, unethical distance from its object. And at the same time, scale *continues*. Excluded from the field of an ethical relation to the object, it stands above it as the negative image of the dynamic, the lived, the emergent, and the engaged, which gambol in the gritty horizontal landscapes of the real. Scale—thought—assures by its exclusion the stability of the field about which it is forbidden to speak. And about which it speaks nonetheless, in a whisper that gives the ground its “first” pneumatic breath.

We tend to act as though we have given objects and methods that either matched them ontologically or did them an injustice. To imagine that injustice in scalar terms—to see the method as “above” the object—means disaggregating with too much sureness the phenomena from the analyses. (This is true whether one privileges the former or the latter; in this dimension of the problem, the avatars of scale and their enemies are on the same side.) I am simply saying: methods are also objects. And vice versa. There is no reason to imagine that the form of transactionality that assumes the object’s phenomenal

passivity and the method's abstract activity could not be subject to the same analysis performed here. The entire sense of the modes of relation between method and object—and the value judgments attached to them—would need to be retheorized in the general terms developed by any immanentist position, be it Spinoza's, Latour's, or something from the object-oriented ontologists. If the ontology is flat, more or less, it will have to be flat for everything. Including flatness, more or less.

I am not therefore concerned here with erasing every difference between what I have been calling the object or the phenomenon, and what we commonly think of as analysis or method. It is not a matter of confusing what happens when Samuel Johnson stubs his toe and what happens when someone refutes Bishop Berkeley. I am even less concerned with attributing to something like *method* all of the phenomenal quiddity or embodied effectiveness of an everyday social space like a classroom or a neighborhood such as would, for example, allow us to collapse method fully into its objects (even if such a homologous situation cannot be completely excluded for certain methods, in certain contexts—we can imagine some hypotheses that would allow us to refine the analogy). My hesitation concerns the purity, the rigor, and the indivisibility of the frontier that separates—already with respect to “life” itself, and along a horizontal axis—objects from methods; and as a consequence, especially, the purity, rigor, and indivisibility of the concept of *objectivity* that ensues.³⁰

For this reason, the homology between methodological scale and spatial scale, which so seductively recalls the structure of analysis and phenomenon, is for me nothing like an inimical confusion, whose clarification would allow us finally to know the objects right. It is rather a call, an enticement to wonder at the intensity and reach of a number of other homologically related binaries, or continua, that organize the way we marshal humanist reason today. Which binaries? To start (more generally?), the distinction between quantity and quality, or the distinction between kind and degree, but also (and more specifically?) the difference between the *longue durée* and the everyday, in approaches to history, the difference between the irreducible density of language and the laws of genre, in approaches to literature, the difference between practice, praxis and theory, in

Marxism, or even the difference between the event and the performative convention, all of which may amount (more generally, once more?) to the difference between freedom and necessity.³¹ Together these distinctions, whose family resemblance and power are not so much a product of heterosis as of incest, or so I am trying to suggest here, go to the very heart of the kinds of thinking that humanists do, and can do, today.³²

Accounting for the active work of such binaries, rather than reifying them as the justifications for an impossible epistemology, would (among other things) save us some time. In a redescribed model of humanist reasoning about scale, there would be nothing inherently bad (politically or epistemologically) about larger scales, or good about smaller ones; rather humanist reasoners would pay careful attention to the transactions and jumps across and among scales, as well as to the ways in which nesting and verticality are disrupted in the social by the various forms of human activity.³³ They would also remember that all active scales of social life depend radically on their production and reproduction by human actors, whose daily acts of reification maintain (and change, over time) all the conceptual and institutional patterns that define the social as such, all of which may well be conceived in scalar terms as a primary function of social life. If we keep seeing scales in the social, that's because actors in the social use scalar logics to construct, maintain, and adjust their realities. When Rabindranath Tagore wrote *The Home and the World*, he was registering and using the scalar difference between "home" and "world," as units already in common practice in the daily social existence of the characters whose life he described, and, over the course of the novel, demonstrating quite clearly the ways in which those two scales interpenetrate and, in the long run, cannot be taken (or lived) as fully hierarchized and nested units of social experience. In the long run, any scholarly description and analysis of the social activity of scales would have to confront, self-reflexively, the history of scale-thinking in humanist reason more generally, and the scale-work of a given research project, in particular, without falling prey to the kind of virtuous denunciation of scales that inevitably produces conceptual hypocrisy in the scholarship. How could you understand Queen Victoria without understanding queens? How could you understand

Nervous Conditions without understanding the postcolonial novel? And how could you understand queens or postcolonial novels without understanding Queen Victoria, or *Nervous Conditions*?

ARTICLE 5

Historical Causality Includes Nondeterministic and Indirect Forces Operating at Multiple Scales. A corollary of the humanist investment in multiscalar analysis (and the description of social processes at multiple, convoluted scales) comes down to a series of beliefs about the nature of historical causality. Against a positivist causal model that might imagine historical effects as resembling those of billiard balls on a pool table, humanist reason expresses the following forms of evidence-based resistance:

1. "Multiscalar causality" means that some causes are operating above, below, or to the side of the billiard balls; no series of actions on the given table/social field can be explained exclusively by causes emerging exclusively from that social field.
2. "Complex causality" involves forms of influence and causation that are not only direct and proximity-driven (as with the billiard balls), but also forms that act indirectly, through and across a variety of social mechanisms that may well cross or jump scales. For instance, the *Zeitgeist* or the "race system" might be a causal factor in a single interpersonal interaction, but so might "got up on the wrong side of the bed this morning." The links across or among such causal factors are not only physical, but also mental, linguistic, social, or psychological; semiotically, they can be symbolic or figural or affective, denotative, or connotative, referential and representational. (Think of how a poem works; see the poem as a synecdoche of the cultural process.) In other words, social causes and effects can "translate" across what we conventionally think of as ontologically distinct levels or spheres of the social. Such translations include the obviously symbolic and semiotic processes whereby an idea becomes language, becomes a law, becomes a judgment, becomes a feeling, becomes a socially prescribed norm, becomes an uncodified set of habits, becomes an argument. But it

also goes to processes that are not explicitly linguistic, as when a building creates (or is created by) an idea, or when a feeling comes from a taste (like a madeleine in tea), or taste is modified by feeling (a preference for dipping one's madeleines in beer).

3. Although all kinds of humanist work will, when confronted with this causal variety, attempt to differentiate between the various degrees of influence among causes, the sum of those degrees of influence does not necessarily add up to 100. Against, that is, quantitative explanatory models that attempt to determine what percentage of a phenomenon stems from certain causes (and indeed mathematically assumes that the total sum of causes adds up to 100 percent), humanist reason argues that, first, the quantification of that kind of influence risks fantasizing a level of precision that does not and cannot exist in the social; and, second, that the sum total of causes will, from this general perspective, often exceed or undercount the idea of a "total" causal inventory. If I ask, for instance, "Would World War I have happened had Gavrilo Princip not assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife, Sophie, on June 28, 1914?" people who know enough about the situation in Europe in 1914 might well respond, "Yes, it probably would have happened anyway. Not exactly in the same way, but probably in a similar way." Of course, we'll never know, but this not-knowing does not interfere with the basic supposition that causes and causality cannot be reduced to historical actuality, but must be considered in relation to various possible worlds that make up any given moment, process, or event. (When humanists perceive the total sum of causes to "add up" to more than 100 percent, they use the word "overdetermination"; events that occur despite what seems like—from a given explanatory perspective—"not enough causes" are, by extension, "underdetermined.")
4. The same holds true for humanist models of cultural influence; indeed, the entire humanist theory of social causality stems from the evidence left us by patterns of cultural influence and meaning that form the backbone of our work. Historical evidence shows that the same cause can have radically different effects in different populations, or even in the same person, at two different times, and that the same effect can stem from radically

different combinations of causes. Consider what we know of the psychology of crowds, and of the ways in which mass behaviors can emerge from a collection of individual motivations that in no way add up to the sum total of the behavior of 50,000 soccer fans, or of a mob.

It would be easy enough to sum this up by arguing that humanist causality draws heavily on chaos theory or descriptions of butterfly effects, so that it would turn out that the humanities were merely intuiting a series of causal mechanisms that have been definitively “proven” by scientific reason. The truer thing to say is that humanist reason modeled both these processes well before their scientific “discovery” in natural phenomena. The idea that regularized effects can emerge from seemingly disconnected phenomena is not new to humanist reason, nor is it new to people in general. Everyone living in the social world lives that situation every day, and any number of theories developed through the apparatuses of humanist reason attempt to explain it. (Consider, alongside the obvious theories of fate or ideology, specific instances like Adam Smith’s invisible hand, Hobbes’s leviathan, or Rousseau’s social contract.)

As for the butterfly effect, as a model for physical processes, it amounts only to a theory of a complicated billiard ball table. As I understand it, the idea is that some butterfly flapping its wings somewhere will cause a series of linked physical events that will lead to a thunderstorm somewhere else very far away. The reliance of this narrative on some very obvious rhetorical strategies, most notably its ironic superposition of the small and the large, the minor and the sublime (but also its aestheticizing use of the flapping butterfly, as opposed to a clomping cockroach), ought not conceal the fact that the causal model it describes is completely banal: one physical thing touches another physical thing, which touches another thing, which touches another thing, and so on, until some balance is tipped on some scale and you get a big physical thing as a result. Straw, meet camel’s back.

Humanist reason imagines instead that the flapping of a butterfly might, if registered phenomenologically by an observer, cause that person to write a series of influential poems (themselves altered in form and reception by a variety of complex cultural processes),

which might then shape the cultural sphere such that butterflies acquired a level of social meaning over and above their role in a variety of natural activities (such as pollination), which might in turn, and for centuries hence, affect people who never read the poems or who live in a world in which the original poems have entirely disappeared. One day, one of those people might write a new poem that, echoing this social meaning, would be taught in the schools. And one day, a student who had failed a test on that very poem might come home and kick their dog. Did the butterfly cause the dog-kicking? Not really . . . but without it, would the student have kicked the dog? Maybe not. Humanist reason exists to explain and understand causal processes like this one, which ladder up and down scales and across a variety of actors and social forces, and to use such processes as possible evidentiary sources for larger-scale models and explanations of how the social works. Humanist reason believes, on the basis of plentiful evidence, that the social productivity or effect of any given object of culture can take place in a variety of registers, including physical contact, but also psychological, linguistic, and social processes, each of which requires a complex theory of possible modes of activity and influence.

This causal complexity means that for any given epistemological particular, the total sum of interesting or useful causal explanations almost always exceeds the scope of a particular piece of research. Years ago, a friend of mine, a quantitative political scientist, was in the habit of asking after every conference presentation he saw, "Is there another equally plausible explanation of the data you've shown us here?" For a humanist attempting to understand the meaning of an Anna Akhmatova poem or the Haitian revolution, the answer will necessarily be, "Of course there is!" The existence of multiple reasonable explanations for any object does not constitute an epistemological problem. It manifests rather the actual social complexity investigated by (and therefore partially produced by, and partially productive of) humanist research which, in being multiscalar and causally complex, socioculturally embedded and interdisciplinarily produced in the ways I have described here, will necessarily produce research paradigms that register those things. Humanist scholarship subjects existing and reified objects to new

ideas and new methods; it also, using new perspectives, finds new objects or creates new objects of analysis that draw from or cross the boundaries of existing objects. In all these endeavors, much of the work of humanist reason is cumulative, tending to increase the richness of our understanding of the workings of culture, rather than attempting to simplify or reduce it. This is so even when it comes to the development of competing large-scale simplifications like structures, systems, or theories, which often serve a mainly heuristic function, existing to highlight features and patterns that emerge when one adopts a certain point of view toward a given object of study. Which of these simplifications will be explanatorily compatible, and which will not, can usually not be worked out in advance, but must be the subject of self-reflexive metadiscourse.

None of this means that humanist work makes no falsifiable claims; I am not saying that anything goes. It does mean that humanists ought to be (and usually are) especially careful to resist any epistemological claims to have discovered the single “level” or process at which things are “really” happening, and in relation to which all the other levels are merely epiphenomenal (as might happen, for instance, were a psychoanalytic reading of *A Raisin in the Sun* to suggest that its racial tensions were merely extrapolations of family drama, and therefore not relevant to the play’s essential meaning).

Much humanist scholarship is therefore additive. In making richer and more complex the systematic, semantic, or causal qualities of some whole, it adduces to the sum total of evidence around that object a set of new considerations, and demands that they be included in any future understanding of the thing in question. Or, in a gesture of typical self-reflexivity, the humanist will demonstrate that the wholeness of a socially stabilized research object (“the *Bhagavad Gita*” or “the Han dynasty,” for instance), can be undermined, made partial or extensible by approaching that object from another direction or with another set of causal priors in mind; this too is a kind of additive, recursive work, in which humanist knowledge shapes and reshapes what we might think of as the sum total of available understandings of the anthropological field, down to the very understanding of what forms of stability operate in it, or the nature of the field itself.

ARTICLE 6

Complex Social Systems Do Not Necessarily Follow Statistical or Linear Patterns; Outliers Often Have an Outsized Importance; the Historical Record Makes Epistemological Demands on Concept-Formation; Materiality Is the Limit to Idealism. The theory of causal complexity affects humanist reason's relation to exceptions, outliers, and other exorbitant social processes or effects. Against a statistical model of social activity (or even of epistemological activity) that would emphasize the degree to which such processes constitute themselves and are made meaningful by the vast majority of behaviors devoted to reproducing their normativity, humanist reason emphasizes the degree to which the minor, the small, the overlooked, or the abjected must be accounted for in the description of social life.

This emphasis is commonly conflated, in humanist metadiscourse, with a certain left politics that seeks to recuperate or protect the minor from the various tyrannies of the majority and sees in the history of ideology and normativity the worst consequences of the basic human drives toward fear, violence, and self-protection. But the claim that outliers must be accounted for—or the stronger version of that claim, which is that the study of outliers best reveals the truth of a given system—does not require an ethical justification. It can be made on primarily epistemological grounds. The most basic insight of structuralism, that systems are composed of negative relations, means that no study of a system can rely (epistemologically) exclusively on the central or major or normal elements of that system because the normal, major, and central themselves rely on the systematic definition and reproduction of fields of abnormality, minority, and eccentricity. Insides and outsides mutually constitute themselves. Which means that no inside can be correctly understood without reference to its outside, and vice versa.

Beyond this structuralist claim, the epistemological emphasis on social and statistical outliers takes two other, related forms. The first rejects on principle any attempt to exclude, on whatever grounds, actually existing practices from a set of claims about the nature of a social field. One of my favorite versions of this kind of argument comes from Derrida's rejection, against Searle's theory of speech

acts, of the idea that a serious study of the nature of language can begin by excluding all kinds of nonserious language (jokes, theatrical dialogue, and so forth). Derrida's argument boils down to this: no human language has ever not had jokes, quotations, and the like; no human society that we know of has ever lived without them. Therefore, any theory that purports to be a theory of language *must*, on epistemological grounds, include evidence from these types of language. A theory that does not would not be a theory of human language, but a theory of the language of some other set of beings which have never actually existed. As Derrida argues, this epistemological demand would remain legitimate even if the entirety of the cultural record included only one single instance of citation or one single joke—the very fact of its possibility, and the evidence of its possibility, requires that any theory of language *in general* should include it.³⁴

This rule can be extended in any number of directions, most of which are fairly common-sensical, but all of which are nonetheless regularly violated by humanist scholars, and therefore in need of substantial self-reflexive work. You can't have a theory of the novel in general if you do not base your theory on the evidence of novels drawn from more than one language, one country, one time period. Note that this does not mean that a theory of novels must include all novels, or that a theory of revolutions must consider all revolutions; it demands rather that the evidence used with respect to a general claim be *representative* with respect to that generality. The humanities share this aspect of reason with the sciences and social sciences (you can't base your claims about viral behavior on the study of a single virus, etc.). Where they tend to differ has to do with the treatment of outliers more generally, as well as with the models of influence that allow causation or relevance to leap across scales or other fields of quantitative or conceptual stability.

For those reasons—and because we have a rich understanding of the negative structuration of the social field—you also can't have a (good) theory of the novel in general unless you include evidence from the novel's outside, whether that outside involves poetry or drama or prose fiction from other places and times. And you can't have a theory of the novel in general that does not include works that

operate on the margins of novelty, which you might be tempted to exclude by declaring that Jean Toomer's *Cane*, for instance, is not "really" a novel. For the same reason, you can't have a theory of revolution that draws only on one revolution. You can't have a theory of biological sex that ignores that fact that a small percentage of human babies are born each year with sexually ambiguous genitalia or chromosomes; you cannot simply consign such people to the realm of the "exception" or the "abnormal" and then (as an extension or enforcement of this epistemological laziness) argue for the surgical correction of such bodies so that they conform with your theory.³⁵ And you cannot build an entire theory of political life around the idea of the single rational individual body when, for the entirety of human history, more than half the population of existing humans have had the capacity to carry for some time two individuals in one body, and have (which we know because we are all here) frequently exercised it.³⁶ In each case, humanist reason insists that the so-called exception must be included in the theorization of the whole, and does so in the full knowledge that the exclusion of those exceptions has so often been made in the name of the production of some form of dis-abling normativity and has so often coincided not with the ideal of democratic and common knowledge, but with the expression of self-regard and of normative power. In this way, the humanist critique of the racist, sexist, or otherwise unjust consequences of epistemological stupidity can stem both from a political distaste for those consequences, but also, and even primarily, from a rejection of the epistemological practices that produce them.

Let me extend my argument about outliers a bit further: in anthropological situations, the outlier or the exception has a relation to the center that is fundamentally *nonlinear*. Relative to its social frequency or normative importance, relative to the amount that it is discussed, noticed, or operationalized in the social, the outlier or the exception may in fact be, on statistical grounds, quite unimportant. But from the perspective of the construction of the social itself, humanist reason argues, this statistical or linear unimportance does not account for the potential structural, psychological, or social centrality of the outlier, which, like the scapegoat (or the shorn woman, or the Jew) may take on an outsized burden of cultural work.

One of the major functions of humanist scholarship involves identifying such outliers and exceptions and reintegrating them into a full and more coherent understanding of the work of social and historical life; indeed, it is the humanist study of such outliers that has given us the more general theory of the nonlinearity of the social that I am reproducing here.

These principles of historical realism and social nonlinearity can be organized into a succession of progressively more demanding assertions:

1. *The principle of evidentiary range:* Theories of X have to draw on evidence from a wide variety of socially recognized instances of X. Otherwise, they are theories of subsets of X (of the British novel, and not the novel in general, for instance).
2. *The principle of evidentiary inclusion:* No feature common to all X can be reasonably removed from the theory of X without producing only a theory of some non-X. Such exclusions are likely to mistakenly produce a “primary” version of X, against which the removed features will count as “secondary” or epiphenomenal.
3. *The principle of nonlinearity:* Not all of those instances of X need be treated equally; indeed, the treatment of all instances of X as the same X will likely miss out on the uneven social structuring of X, as well as the internal diversity of X as a category. Outliers and exceptions are likely to have a strongly nonlinear importance to the social reproduction of X.
4. *The principle of negative differentiation:* Theories of X need to account for a relevant subset of instances of non-X, near-X, or just-barely-X (outliers and near-misses), as well as theories and instances of normatively designated X; they also need to account for social objects that share significant features with X but are not generally recognized as X for whatever reason.

One simple and very beautiful expression of the second principle comes at the end of the introduction to Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe*. One assumption running through modern European thought, Chakrabarty writes, “is that the human is ontologically singular, that gods and spirits are in the end ‘social facts,’ that the social

somehow exists prior to them.” Such an assumption permits one to imagine that gods and spirits are subsequent to the production of the social, that the social is something that throws up the idea of gods and spirits on occasion for particular reasons. But since, as Chakrabarty writes, “one empirically knows of no society in which humans have existed without gods and spirits accompanying them,” any theory of the social that excludes those things has a great deal of explaining to do. He continues:

Although the God of monotheism may have taken a few knocks . . . the gods and agents inhabiting practices of so-called “superstition” have never died anywhere. I take gods and spirits to be existentially coeval with the human, and think from the assumption that the question of being human involves the question of being with gods and spirits. . . . And this is one reason why I deliberately do not reproduce any sociology of religion in my analysis.³⁷

This is an evidence-based argument: there has never been a society without spirits. Therefore, no concept of society should treat spirits as an optional or epiphenomenal factor in human social life; the evidence suggests, rather, that the ideas of the social, the human, and the spiritual or godly have historically been coconstitutive. This does not mean that it is not possible to study religion, but it does mean that treating religion as though it were somehow a “feature” of the social, rather than part of what organizes the social *as* the social in every human community that has ever existed, confuses the ontology of institutional topics with the actuality of human practice.

The Derridean version of the Chakrabarty rule (principle number 4) extends the general statement—that things that have never *not* happened need to be included in theories of the social structures that include them—to things that have only ever happened *once*. Together, these amount to a general principle of *historical realism*.³⁸

We have already seen how a sense of historical realism must be influenced by something like historical unrealism (i.e., by the imaginative reconstruction of nonactual events, objects, and processes, all of which form the critical context for the understanding of

historical actuality as such). More speculatively, we may wish to ask what role such historical unrealism plays in the full epistemological construction of concepts. Must a theory of X include instances of X that have *never actually happened* but could be imagined to happen? We can imagine, even if we have never lived in one, a United States in which white supremacy does not play a central role; does the possibility of such a society need to be included, as a potential capacity, in the more general understanding of the United States as a political entity? To what extent does the fact that some people have experienced smaller-scale social situations (friendships, classrooms, clubs, or groups of any type) that do not seem fundamentally organized by white supremacy need to be considered as a marker of such possibilities at the larger scale of society in general? (Have such smaller-scale situations ever actually existed? To what extent did their existence depend on the larger structures that surround them?) Against all these questions, does the Chakrabartian reminder—that one empirically knows of no American society in which humans have coexisted without white racism—require one to reject, on reasonable grounds, the inclusion of such a capacity in a full understanding of the United States?

Here, we confront the way that all humanist reason encounters, in its orientation toward its own present, the political valence of its work. It is easy to see how a certain kind of historical realism can lead to political cynicism: “We have never known a world without violence, so we might as well stop trying to make the world less violent.” And at the same time, it is clear that historical realism can sometimes be very much on the side of an opening of the social toward a juster and more common life for all its human and nonhuman subjects, as when, for instance, Chakrabarty shows how a fully Europeanized secularism fails to account for the lives of billions of others and asks what kinds of ideas might perform a fuller accounting of the anthropological field. There are no easy answers here; no set of decontextualized epistemological practices guarantees the production of a good world or leads inexorably to a worse one. As a matter of historical realism, one may well see that things have often been bad, and are still very bad; and yet we can also see that things have gotten better,

here and there. And it is easy enough to imagine, again as a matter of mere realism, how they might be better still.

Such questions are not, for humanist scholarship, merely epiphenomenal. They belong, rather, to the heart of the transition between the subjective interests that motivate the work of scholarship and the potential objectivity of its conclusions, since to know the anthropological lifeworld, to know the forces—human and nonhuman, momentary and transhistorical—that shape it, is always to open oneself to the objective return of one’s work to its subjective and generating present, and thus to the possibility that not only oneself but others could be changed by this new knowledge, by the holding of this new knowledge in common.

To be absolutely clear: nothing about the character of this material reality (or indeed the vast multiplicity of material realities) implies that a full accounting of its character will lead, in the long positivist run, to the production of a complete or simple vision of a whole that would come to dominate it. In other words, the working of the social is not like the movement of the billiard balls on a table, but more complicated. The difference between the two is not a matter of simply increasing the number of factors to be calculated, or the amount of computing power at hand, until we master every element of the system and can reduce its operations to a set of general laws. The laws, the ideas or concepts, that we might bring to the analysis of the social—and which may well participate in the construction or consolidation of that social, both from a position “above” the social as well as “around” or “through” it—confront continually and *over a continuously changing temporality* the materialities that express, constitute, and alter it.³⁹ Here, humanist reason rejects—though it is, like scientific reason, continually tempted by—models of unitary determination that emerge from things like a vulgarized Hegelian idealism, in order to emphasize, as Aijaz Ahmad once put it, the “*tension . . .* between the problematic of a final determination,” on the one hand, “and the utter historicity of multiple, interpenetrating determinations” that will finally resolve it (for a given moment) into something that none of the “historical agents who struggle over [its] outcome” will have exactly predicted, or wanted.⁴⁰

ARTICLE 7

Fuzziness, Ambiguity, and Contradiction Are Socially Functional; Any Humanist Analysis That Treats Them Necessarily as Problems to Be Resolved Has Misunderstood Its Object. A person says “I love you” to another person. The second person says “I love you” back. If you push hard enough, you will find that what they mean is not exactly the same, not only because one said it first (and therefore may have meant something like “Please reassure me that you love me”) and the other second (“Don’t worry; I love you”; or possibly “I don’t know why you need this reassurance, but here you go anyway”), but because at a more intense level of analysis, the very conceptions of “I” and “you” that characterize the thought of our two interlocutors borrow from, and express, large-scale differences in attitude toward the very nature of the self/other relation, whether these are the result of individual, psychological factors or larger, sociocultural ones. And forget about figuring out what either of them means by “love”!

The same sort of analysis can be applied to any conversation, to any social process. How do we ever really know, at a certain level of analysis, that we understand each other, or that we mean what we say? How can we ever know what it might mean to live justly or fairly, to have a good society, to be a good person, to be “fulfilled” or “happy” or “sad” or “embedded in a rich lifeworld of possibilities, one shared by all members of a community and supported by a democratic social welfare state”? What if it’s just the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis all the way down, and no one ever actually understands anyone else?

This drive to specificity, and the problems created by our awareness of the deep historical and social uniqueness of any given element of the anthropological field, characterize a great deal of humanist thought. They do so usefully, much of the time, as they emphasize the ways in which contextualization shapes the meaning, import, and effects of any given social situation, process, or artwork. More self-reflexively, this more general interest in uniqueness helps humanists recognize the possible forms of contamination that will cross from their epistemological tools (concepts, words) to their epistemological subjects, or grasp the ways in which all knowledge developed from a subjective process (even when that process is reified and therefore

made at least putatively objective by institutional structures or disciplinary norms) will necessarily be mediated by that subjectivity, which determines not only the matter of *individual* bias but the larger forms of subjectivization that we might think of as institutional or ideological. We all think, we think, in terms determined by the parameters of our selves, of our languages, of our social formations, of our eras. And those forms of subjectification necessarily influence our conceptualization of the past: if you approach the psychological world of the Tang dynasty with Freudian analysis and no understanding of the concept of the Chinese heart-mind, *xin*, you will probably miss a few things about what was going on at the time.

At its worst, this approach to contextual specificity leads to a stultifying or self-righteous pseudonominalism that demands that everything be considered “on its own terms,” even when such a thing would be, as I said at the beginning of the book, essentially impossible. To study the Tang lifeworld with concepts drawn exclusively from the Tang lifeworld can no longer be done. None of us are natives of the Tang. Beyond that, though all humanists believe that the study of the Tang lifeworld (or whatever) ought to include at least some awareness of the concepts native to it, our scholarship shows over and over that it can generate useful knowledge by bringing to bear social, cultural, and historical concepts that emerge from outside the native situation. The major epistemological problem is not that humanists bring concepts from outside to their objects, but rather that the selection of concepts has tended historically to cast a geographic shadow over humanist work: if only the privileged parts of the world can produce concepts or methods (for which the less-privileged parts will then only serve as test cases or illustrations), then we are almost certainly likely to be making epistemological mistakes. Similarly, if our “outside” concepts only come from the historical present and apply mainly to objects of the past, and never the other way around, well . . . some basic sense of epistemological modesty ought to warn us that we are probably doing something wrong. Social concepts don’t wear out; their value is not finally determined by either their original context or some later one. Conceptual value always exists as a form of potential that can be activated by someone willing to do the work. Concepts developed in the classical Chinese

analysis of poetry may tell us as much about William Blake as concepts developed in the analysis of William Blake tell us about classical Chinese poetry.

All this would be enough to make us suspicious of the ways in which an awareness of the uniqueness of historical situations (or the meanings of individual words) can lead to a stultified metadiscourse of humanist epistemology. But there is more to say. Because the real problem with this emphasis on specificity is that it ignores the fact that the specificity and uniqueness it observes *is itself a function of a particular scale of analysis*—namely, that of singularity-production—that cannot be extended into a general theory of the social unless it considers the work that the social does at other scales.

Remember the Chakrabarty test: If no one has ever known *exactly* what something means, if no one has ever taken something *fully on its own terms*, then you probably should not build your theory of reason around the demand that someone do so, despite the obvious comfort of appealing to a Kantian regulative ideal. Instead, you probably ought to account for the fact that despite the fact that this gap between what one person means or does and what another understands about it exists in every historical situation that has ever taken place, people seem to understand one another perfectly well often enough to make friendships work; to make institutions work; to make jokes, novels, and plays work; or to make, in general, the entire labor of the social so effective.

Come back to our couple. They say “I love you” to each other. Neither of them means exactly the same thing. But still: it works. Each of them feels satisfied by the dialogue; each of them feels addressed or responded to *enough*. The fact that they don’t engage in a long meta-conversation about exactly what they meant is not a relationship disaster or a sign of their lack of epistemological will; the lack of precision is a feature, not a bug, of the social situation they’re in. They don’t need, or want, to absolutely understand each other—at least not right then—because they’re getting ready for work, or going to sleep, or watching a show. The fuzziness of their dialogue is, though probably unconscious, nonetheless essentially deliberate. Each of them gets what they want from the conversation. Its ambiguity is *socially functional*, at a certain scale. It *works*.⁴¹

The history of humanist scholarship demonstrates over and over the capacity of a wide variety of nonprecise, nondetermined, and nondeterminable social forms to function in just these ways. Most human verbal and visual signification depends on such mechanisms—the entire world of tropes and figures, jokes and plays on words, symbols and emblems, intertextuality and reference of all types, all of which have never *not* existed in the social in one way or another. The same goes for the entire world of personal identity and identification, not only in socially intense and even dramatic situations like racial or gendered passing, but in all of the small and ordinary ways in which individuals and institutions mobilize, consciously and unconsciously, ambiguity, fuzziness, or apparent contradiction in the service of their social selves.

One human response to all this ambiguity has been historically consistent: to attempt to pin it down, define it once and for all, to fix and determine not just meaning, but social position, the nature of God, the limits of the law, the forms of legitimate kinship, or the procedures for the distribution of welfare benefits. These attempts to reduce or confine ambiguity, to resolve mystery or contradiction, whose histories organize the strain of iconoclasm that extends from religious life to the fashion system, can be socially useful (it's good to have some basic agreement about the laws of the road), as well as socially destructive (when they justify, as they so often do, forms of institutional violence or, say, religious warfare). But none of these practices or arguments, these drives to fix absolutely and for all time, has ever finished the job, has ever resolved social ambiguity entirely. Ambiguity lives on. Which suggests rather strongly that the *nature of social life is functionally ambiguous at certain scales*, and that it will probably always be so.

The obvious target of my critique is any positivistic epistemological system that would attempt to define absolutely a series of social relations or processes, whether these be interpersonal or semiotic, or that would spend a great deal of time refining its descriptive terminology to an exactitude that would attempt, finally, to reduce the social to a set of determined and determining terms. But the acceptance of ambiguity as a form of socially functional activity also exposes weaknesses in two strains of humanist scholarship.

The first overfetishizes ambiguity. Finding socially functional instances of ambiguity that support the powerful at the expense of the weak, such scholarship confuses the political outcome of that process with the nature of ambiguity itself, and falls into the utopian trap of imagining that we need to build a world in which everything says what it is and is clear about what it means, a world without ideology or unconscious coercion of any kind, a world in which everyone uses the right words at the right time, all the time. In so doing, it aligns itself, like all utopianism, with a vision of the end of history.

The second strain takes its discovery of these forms of ambiguity as the revelation of a great secret about the nature of all power—that it has at its heart a contradiction, a fuzziness, or an aporia that constitutes itself in the form of a fundamental emptiness. As a counterpoint to a common-sensical, pre-Foucauldian idea of the workings of power, and as a balloon-puncturing gesture against certain too-optimistic visions of the nature of human existence, such a position can come in handy. But making ambiguity a secret, projecting onto it a kind of dark and terrifying valorization, ignores the ways in which ambiguity, by virtue of its constitutive action in every dimension and at every scale of the social, does not so much constitute a secret—how can it be secret if everyone uses it all the time, daily?—as a matter of living practice, one that can have a wide variety of consequences, including the consequence of undermining or even transforming not only the structures of social power, but its very nature. If we imagine this ambiguity or aporia as a functional aspect of the conceptual management and daily navigation of the social world—if we see ambiguity (or paradox, or contradiction) as a positive social form rather than as the negation of the social itself—then we let go of the quasi-theological fetishization of the revelation of contradictions. In so doing we also forgo the rhetorical Romanticism of much humanist scholarship, which depends for its force on our tragic recognition or anticipation of a world in which all our values, all our social systems and hopes and plans and stupid organizing and shoring up of life against its various tragedies, all our ridiculous effort at being kind or decent where we can, mean nothing after all.

To frame this argument now as a project: What happens if instead of taking the aporia at the heart of the justice-law nexus as a kind

of conceptual failure in the nature of humanity itself, as a tragic reminder of the impossibility of the full achievement of justice—or if, instead of treating the impossible horizon of a total hospitality as a constitutive absence in the actual performance of any genuinely functional hospitality—one recognizes that these gaps or failures, these aporia, are generated by the social in order to manage the distance between the equally social work of imaginary ideals and living practice? What if, that is, we treat the social as though it were *putting into play* the very concepts that we believe we reveal within it? And what if, in that case, the deconstructive act of seeing and naming this kind of social work were not a matter of unmasking a crisis, but rather of discovering a living, manipulable process? What if, that is, the ambiguity inherent in all social processes, the forms of contradiction, paradox, and eccentricity that so consistently form the topic of deconstructive revelation, were in fact inside the social after all, not as blind spots but as forms of actually existing utility? In such a case, these aporia, and the work they do for us in helping make possible a distinction between justice and law—and hence in producing, for instance, a demand on the law, an insistence that the law be held to account in relation to some other concept that lies both within and without it, would be understood as the institutional structures whereby social actors of all kinds attempt to manage the gap between the utopia of their imaginations and the strictures of their actual lives.

ARTICLE 8

The Imagination Is an Epistemologically Necessary Response to the Actuality of Humanist Evidence. The ideology of understanding and empathetic identification that defined certain justifications of humanist reason during the German *Methodenstreit*, which appears most notably in Wilhelm Dilthey's emphasis on *Verstand* as a key element of humanist practice, points us to the long-standing association of *imagination* with humanist reason. Experiment, on the other hand, belongs as an epistemological term to the natural and quantitative social sciences; it describes the capacity to radically control the conditions of the epistemological field of observation, such that the

processes under investigation can be reliably repeated. No such capacity characterizes humanist work. The contextual complexity and semiotic/social richness of our evidence simply do not allow for it.

At its worst, and in ways we all know, this distinction justifies claims that humanistic knowledge is, unlike scientific knowledge, fundamentally uncertain—that it is a matter of the scholar’s “telling stories” or “making things up,” that it relies heavily on the rhetorical power of its presentation or the charismatic force of institutions and people. Humanists have often responded to this caricature by defensively pointing out that the sciences too benefit from institutional and personal rhetoric, that they too are social procedures (a fact clearly proven by ethnographies of scientific laboratories), that they too are “biased.” All this is true enough, at some level, but it does not adequately reckon with the epistemological legitimacy of humanist practice, since rather than make explicit the reasons why such practices are epistemologically necessary, and therefore reasonable, they seek to bring the sciences down to the level of the humanities. My goal here is not to perform the same procedure in reverse, to elevate humanist practice to the caricatured certainty of scientific rationality, but to produce a clearer picture of the legitimacy of humanist work. That the “two cultures” of modern reason come, after this legitimization, to resemble one another and to overlap in a number of ways does not motivate the approach, though it is a consequence of it.

So, the imagination. I have already argued that historical reason must consider counterfactuals and nonactualities, and that it must do so within a disciplinarily specific and epistemologically articulated field of relevance and plausibility. No anthropological analysis of a cultural object, no sociological description of a social process, no close reading of a work of art, no description of a historical event, is possible without it. In this way, we might say, humanist reason *requires* that we “make things up.” Making things up is central to any kind of knowing that considers the complete nature of the contextually bound evidence it processes.

Because whatever context humanists study will be lost or distanced from them in some crucial respects, and because humanists recognize that the full understanding of any given social situation or

object requires, ideally, drawing on as many kinds of possible relation to it, humanist reason depends on the imagination in another important way. Humanists *must*, as a matter of epistemological practice, imagine what it might have been like to “be there,” whether that being there involves participation in a social process or event, the experience of a maker or producer of some cultural artifact, the experience of a member of a culture encountering that process or artifact in situ. Of course such imagination will necessarily be speculative; of course it will get things wrong; of course it will run the risk, always, of failing to account for the ways in which its own historical situation distorts its imaginative capacity. But humanist reason will always attempt nonetheless to reconstruct that primary embodied experience of the social, and it will do so on the basis of plentiful evidence—historical documents, theories of human behavior or the psychology of crowds, an informed understanding of the patterns of institutional development, and so on. This imaginative work, which can extend to the effort to sustain a full empathetic awareness of the consciousness of a single individual, is bound by disciplinary practices and codifications of legitimacy. It constitutes a critical element of most humanist epistemological practice.

As for the criticism that humanists are just telling stories, this practice too can be understood as a necessary outgrowth of the epistemological necessity created by humanist objects, which are necessarily *bound in time*. This does not prevent humanists from developing synchronic models of diachronic processes, nor does it keep them from using transhistorical categories that necessarily organize a wide variety of data points into a single, stable structure (concepts like “the novel,” “the working class,” or “feudalism” do this kind of work), even if the general humanist suspicion of subordinating hierarchism necessarily will thereafter tend to reduce and specify them. But this synchronic structuration operates always within the framework of the actual existence of human communities, with all their embeddedness in sociohistorical and environmental processes, the most fundamental and universal of which is the forward direction of time. That does not mean that human societies have not developed alternative conceptualizations of their relations to historical time—cyclical, millennialist, or stage-oriented—or that the phenomenological

experience of time works in this way, but it does mean that for modern, secular humanist reasoners, these social formations are themselves operating in a continuous temporal continuum that is shared and transhistorical.

That is why so much humanist scholarship aims either to establish delimiting structures (e.g., the nineteenth century, the modern period) or to destabilize them. This back-and-forth does not signify uncertainty or wrongness. It stems from the ongoing social life of the various pressures of humanist knowledge-production, which operate always in a context determined by what most people believe about X. In a world where people believe that X is stable, humanists will work to demonstrate its instability; in a world where people think that X is unstable, humanists will work to demonstrate its stability. This thermostatic role, which is partially determined by the subjective conditions of the production of knowledge, is one of the main functions of humanist work.

The scholarly value of a social object will not be, therefore, limited to its immediate present or to the socially or individually conscious apperception of its worth. It will be contextually bound across multiple temporal scales, moving forward and backward. This boundeness is in many cases nonlinear: the force of an object does not diminish incrementally as one moves further, temporally or spatially, from its origin; neither do its explanatory contexts grow in relevance as they approach the “natural” scale of the phenomenon. Rather, any object or movement may reemerge, become newly relevant, for reasons that belong to the context of some historical future that fastens onto it. Likewise it may turn out that the causal structures that feel most explanatorily relevant for a given object may stem from scales operating far from it, temporally or geographically; it may be that the best contemporary understanding of a given object comes from methods developed long after, or long before, that object’s emergence into culture, or that new tools will make visible or relevant a process that was neither visible nor relevant to the people who lived in or around it, who may not have experienced that process in a primary sense at all. That various elements of the social lifeworld that humanists study model for us this very set of interactions across space and time—that people still believe in religious ideas developed

by nomadic Jews, that our hour has sixty minutes because of Babylonian mathematics, that a classical work of art can be remade and renewed in the present by a work that cites or modifies it—each of these examples illustrates the ways in which humanist reason develops out of the evidence that the history of the planet and the universe have placed before it.

ARTICLE 9

Humanist Scholarship Creates Social Value. Humanists Value Scholarship That Increases Richness, Makes the Secondary Primary, and Creates Transportable Concepts. Consider two kinds of scientific value: the first, the value that science produces for society at large in the form of various truth-claims (about how to measure and think about force) that lead to social practices (the building of bridges or airplanes) that benefit nonscientists and scientists alike. Let's call this "social" value. Then consider a second, more restricted form of value: the value that scientists accord to the work of other scientists by virtue of its being *scientifically* useful—by virtue, that is, of its capacity to extend and engage the work of science more generally, to contribute to the epistemological and disciplinary development of a field. Call this "epistemological" value.

The standard claims are that the humanities produce little to no social value at all (a position common to enemies of the humanities everywhere), and that, where they do, it is by virtue of an increase in the value of the individuals formed by a humanistic education (a position fairly common among humanists themselves).⁴² But this thinking ignores all the ways in which humanist scholarship shapes the world by altering its sense of the past, of the functioning of social processes, of the operation of social categories, of the structures and patterns that organize aesthetic culture, and so on. The idea of social democracy is a humanist idea. It has effects. The idea of environmentalism is a humanist idea. It has effects. The idea of the modern prison system, and the idea of prison reform, are humanist ideas. They have effects. And so on. The tendency of the most effective forms of humanist work to expand and to belong to everyone, so that their results no longer count as a matter of humanist work,

partially explains why people imagine that the humanities do not create social value. The reality is that humanist social value at its most valuable belongs to everyone, including scientists and social scientists (who then do research on things like democracy or the environment), which is why it seems not to exist at all.

The social effectiveness of humanist work in such realms as the law, social formations, self-conceptualization, institution-building, or aesthetic production are counterparts to those provided by scientific or technological advances. This capacity to be effective is a measure of scholarship's *realism*. What I mean is that the fact of effectiveness in the world tells us something about the world; being effective responds to and addresses something in the world. This is as true for the various equations and principles governing the construction of an effective bridge—effective because it crosses the ravine, because it does not fall down when walked upon, and realistic, therefore, in its capacity to engage with and address reality (whether this reality exists specifically in the terms that humans give to it [“gravity,” “mass”] matters not)—as it is for the various principles and evidentiary procedures governing a set of claims about the effects of colonialism upon the psychic makeup of the colonized. If these latter are effective, if they make a difference in the world, it is because like the bridge they respond to, and address, the social reality in which they act and from which they emerge. Claims do not have to be true to be effective; but anything that is effective in the world is realistic in this sense, and its effectiveness can be explored in order to understand the nature of the reality that it successfully addresses. (Imagine a study that asks: Why are the lies told by narcissists so effective? What kind of reality do they address, and what in them—clearly not the truth-claims—addresses that reality?)

So much for social value.

The epistemological value of humanist scholarship—the forces that make humanists value a particular piece of scholarship and hence use it, cite it, respond to it, extend it, and so on—stems largely from three linked factors:

1. Valuable humanist work increases the richness of our understanding of a social process, historical event, or cultural artifact. There

is value, that is, in adding to the total store of knowledge about something, even if that increase does little other work—does not make new things possible, does not intervene in some important debate, does not substantially alter our understanding of the past. Because humanist objects remain relevant over time and can be seen in new ways as their own historical contexts change—think of the way that our understanding of mid-twentieth-century fascism has been altered by the recent rise in nationalism and anti-Semitism—increases in richness are always possible. And because humanist scholarship does not and cannot maintain a strict boundary between the objects it studies and the present in which they are studied—because humanist scholarship is subjective in origin and epistemologically relational—this increase in richness will not just be an increase in richness of the *object* of knowledge, but also always a potential increase in richness of our understanding of the motivating *subject* that creates it (i.e., both ourselves and our methods).

2. Valuable humanist work makes *secondary* social formations, effects, and activities visible, and thus potentially moveable into the realm of *primary* social life. This is true at a wide variety of scales, from studies that show how common reading practices shape communities of readers to ones that address the scope and effects on human subjectivity of vast geological forces like ice ages or contemporary climate change. It is also true for studies that look at individual people from a social or psychological perspective, as well as studies that examine the formation of ideological norms, of sociocultural discourses, of intellectual movements, shifts in labor markets, impacts created by shifts in legal or social practices, new media technologies or structures of feeling.

In practice, making secondary aspects of culture primary can take a number of forms, ranging from the symptomatic or unmasking model typical of the hermeneutics of suspicion to the seemingly atheoretical and descriptive emphases in the sociology of Erving Goffman or Harold Garfinkel, recently taken up in literary studies as a counter-model to symptomatic reading. Both sides of the so-called reading wars can be thought of as emphasizing, from this perspective, two different kinds of secondary

formation—the first a subterranean secondariness whose organizing force goes unnoticed precisely because it is so deep; the second a surface secondariness that goes unnoticed precisely because it is so plainly there, because its evidence is so much in front of us that it appears completely unremarkable. In this way, “surface” and “depth” (as well as “closeness” and “distance,” for that matter) reveal themselves most clearly as terms not in relation to one another, but in relation to their truest opposite: the *normal* or *average* point of view, which is neither close nor far away, which has neither umbral depth nor matte superflatness, the undermining and complexifying of whose primary and completely “obvious” there-ness constitutes the true object of much humanist epistemological work.⁴³

That such work calls to and claims, in the end, a certain social value, is one of its most prominent rhetorical demands. Many close readings in literature, many case studies in sociology or ethnography, and many historical arguments sustained by archival research, make claims about their value on the basis of their capacity to clarify and reveal the mechanisms that have shaped human experience (epistemological value); and then make claims about the ways in which these clarifications and revelations might help us understand our contemporary moment or give us some more *primary* purchase on some previously *secondary* force that has determined the workings of our lives (social value). That the ordering of these claims proceeds almost always from epistemological to social suggests something of the necessary armature of humanist rhetoric, as well as something of the deeper social forces governing the transition from subjective to objective knowledge, as we understand those terms today.

3. Humanist scholarship produces value when evidence that has been generalized into a conceptual formation becomes relevant to cases beyond the particular ones used in the generation of that concept. This happens when, for instance, the study of a particular food riot teaches us something about riots in general, or about the history of a time period in general; or when the study of the workings of the racial imaginary in a certain set of texts or novels teaches us something about the racial imaginary in general, or in

the nineteenth century, or in novels in general, or in the northern United States. The most valued humanist work almost inevitably generates “strong theory”—a theory, that is, that acquires a large-scale comparative force insofar as it applies not only to the original evidentiary conditions of its making, but also to a much wider variety of conditions: a theory of performative gender, for instance, that is useful for thinking not only about gender today, but also about gender at any historical moment in any historical place.

Humanists tend to value strong theories over weak ones, even when they say they don’t (even the idea of strong versus weak theory is a strong theory; claims that we should do more weak theory are themselves strong by virtue of their interest in their own transportability). But theories can be too strong; these create less epistemological value than strong but flexible ones. Work that simply reproduces a strong theory verbatim in relation to some new evidence (“the study of this poem once again proves that Lacan’s analysis of the relation between the Real and the Symbolic is correct”), does not follow the idiographic injunction to allow the object to have its say, and also tends, as a result, to be less valuable to humanists than work that allows the object-theory relation to go both ways.

Together, these forms of social and epistemological value make up much of the ways in which humanists value their work. But a number of other factors also interfere in the production of humanist value, many of which take place at the level of form. I love work sometimes for the quality of its sentences. I also love those moments when the author does something clever with the evidence, makes some surprising intellectual move that I had not seen coming, or connects, like a lightning bolt, two ideas that I had not imagined together. I love them for the same reason that I love seeing someone score an amazing goal or play, extraordinarily, a piece of music: for the thrill of seeing someone do something so well that I feel my own humanity extended and honored by its accomplishment. The awareness and recognition of these forms of value are of a piece with the humanist recognition that form matters—that intellectual work, even when it can be paraphrased, nonetheless happens in a crucible, in which the expression of the idea, not just the idea itself, is what sets the mind on fire.

The humanities are nothing without this recognition, and they are nothing without a strong and conscious awareness of the value of its practice—not only for humanists but for humans in general.

3. AN OPEN FUTURE

For a rethought and redescribed humanist reason, nothing is inherently sacred. Nothing is inherently singular. Everything from the speck of dust to the body of a loved one is defined by a malleable, socially manipulable and socially determined *Affektionspreis*. Sacredness and singularity are forms of social value produced by human activity, including the action of simply paying attention to something, of caring enough about it to recognize its uniqueness or its beauty. That such sacredness and singularity have been reified in social institutions (such as museums) is not in and of itself epistemologically bad, though the partial distribution of those reifications can be, as any analysis of the differential distribution of objects in the “art museum” and the “anthropological museum” will suggest. But the reifications of singularity in objects do not prove that singularity only exists there; they prove only that the social organizes itself around the uneven distribution of singularity and organizes its concepts around just such a distribution, even when those concepts no longer adequately describe the actual distribution of various socially determined *Affektionspreise*, or even when in fact they never did. Singularity is the product of a relation; it is determined by personal and institutional action, not by the ontology of any object as such—even if that object is, as it is in Kant, a unique historical event or a rational human being.⁴⁴

One major social site for the reification of singularity has been, as I have been suggesting in this book, the metadiscourse on humanist reason, which has derived from the reification of singularity in aesthetic objects and in human history the ethico-epistemological justifications that have helped humanists for over a century understand and explain what they do. I have been arguing that this explanation is wrong. Remember Chakrabarty: if the humanities have never actually worked the way this metadiscourse claims they do, then neo-Kantian

descriptions of the human sciences *do not actually describe the human sciences, but some other thing that has never existed*. My first claim, therefore, is that we ought to stop deriving ethical principles or justifications for the humanities from bad descriptions of what they do. My second argument is that we ought to try to describe the actual work of humanist reason and derive some principles from it—more or less what I’ve done in this chapter.

Justifications for social activity ought to be drawn from true—reasonable, epistemologically grounded, shareable in common—descriptions of that activity. And the ethical principles governing that activity ought minimally to begin deriving goals from the best actually existing versions of that activity, rather than from a fantastical or idealized projection of that activity. Yes, I know that such a program may leave us short of utopia. But at least for my lifetime, it would be interesting to see if we could get all humanist reason to be as good—as epistemologically and socially powerful, as broadly applicable and useful and shareable—as the very best work that humanist reason has done so far. If we ever get everything to that level, I’m certainly willing to talk about what happens next. There’s plenty of work to do in the interim.

My other large-scale claim is that the metadiscourse on humanist reason has had in the past, and has right now, some bad consequences for the humanities.⁴⁵ These include accepting, and even emphasizing, the difference between the humanities and the sciences, on for instance the grounds that that the former are oriented toward “interpretation” or “understanding” and the latter toward “explanation”; or that the former are oriented toward “feeling” and the latter toward “doing”; or that the former are fundamentally subjective and the latter objective; or that the former are ethical, ideological, or personal and the latter are morally neutral, objective, and universal. The humanist critique of the ideology of scientific positivism should have made it clear to everyone reading this book how false and dangerous the fantasies describing the right side of the humanities-sciences pairing have been.

But the fantasies describing the left side are just as false and as dangerous, because they radically delimit the field of activity of humanist reason and deny the ways in which its procedures and processes

explain things, do things, and make objective, shared knowledge possible.⁴⁶ That is why I am describing the work humanists do as a matter of reason, and why a far broader history of human reason of all types, one that would recognize in that history the extraordinary diversity of socially legitimate knowledge-practices (on one scale) as well as the extraordinary commonalities across them (on another), would be necessary in order to produce a complete and unbroken understanding of the emergence of modern humanist reason, as well as the emergence of its metadiscourse.

For now the challenge is this: for the humanities to become responsible for their practice. This taking responsibility will mean abandoning, I am afraid, the residual forms of protection that circle our beloved objects, including the forms of protection that imagine them to be immune to the circulation of violence or of capital (which they most assuredly are not), and to take account therefore of the degree to which idealized forms of being are incompatible (Chakrabarty again) with the evidence given to us by the history of the species. Among other things this means letting go of the centrality of the human to the humanities, which requires us both to recognize the ways in which our experience of the social is subtended by a biological and evolutionary history—and therefore sometimes very much “top-down,” in both positive and negative ways—and also to recognize that all beings with minds operate in some kind of a social sphere, and to see that these spheres do not differ in ontological kind from the ones we inhabit. This means that the humanities ought to include as fields of comparable interest many of the subjects and populations currently housed in zoology, and that basic questions of ethical and civic responsibility to other minded beings ought to be part of our general remit (as they already are in the field of animal studies, one subset of the practice of humanist reason from which I learned to think these thoughts).

These changes would also require letting go of the forms of intellectual prejudice that stem from humanist protectionism around its privileged objects, the insistence that some respect for the other requires a thinking of it purely at its level, on its own terms, from the bottom up, and so on. The ethical insistence on flatness, complexity, and ground-up thinking that characterizes humanist metadiscourse

would have to give way to a theory of knowledge that recognizes the necessity of concepts for all reason-work, and imagines that conceptualization can be just as much a matter of respect for another as nonconceptualization. At the far end, this would require humanists to be far more open than they have been to large-scale thinking of the structuralist or even computational type, as well as to arguments drawing on such forms of knowledge as biology or medicine, and to do the work of describing epistemologically appropriate practices that use such kinds of evidence—to integrate them, in other words, into the field of humanist reason proper, rather than allowing them to function as a threatening outside. To be clear: This is not an argument that existing practices of humanist scholarship ought to be replaced by such fields, by deterministic models and by the like; it is rather a claim that humanist scholarship will best be able to insist on the value (social and epistemological) of the kinds of close or small-scale forms of attention that it brings to the epistemological table if it, first, stops being so afraid of the so-called violence of syncretic modes of thinking (which it *already uses all the time anyway*), and instead begins to address those modes, to take them on as a matter of practice, and to integrate its practices and experiments in those modes into its more general metadiscourse.

What do the humanities get in return for these changes? An enormous expansion in their field of application. There could and should be humanist thinking in every field, about every kind of object; there should be biologists who tell the story of a single cell, physicists who tell the story of a single atom, and historians of rivers and of continental drift (call them “geologists”). I am not talking about thematizing important social or scientific topics by teaching classes on the “representation” of them. I am not talking about reading five novels featuring poor people and claiming that you have taught a class on poverty. I am saying that the historical and social and economic experience and nature of poverty cannot be understood without humanistic thought, and that a complete understanding of poverty will of necessity involve the humanist investigation of a wide variety of human cultural and economic activity, and lived activity, at any number of scales or in any number of social forms, including those that we call “works of art.” And

the same for questions of political conflict, for questions of human or group psychology, for questions about humans and their natural or mechanical tools, and so on. And for the history of literariness and aesthetic production more generally, since as we know, humans have *never* lived without dancing, without storytelling, without figurative language, without technological mediations of the mind and of the body, all of which constitute therefore primary (rather than epiphenomenal) matters for the understanding of human life on this planet and in this universe.

Most humanists already believe these things. But we need to see that the consequences of this belief carry us much further forward than they have so far—that they take us out of the comfortable rooms in which we have both thrived and (sometimes) cowered in the face of the rise of the ideologies of scientific positivism and the attacks on humanist reason by right-wing populists and neoliberals.⁴⁷ The people who are actively engaged in the attempts, political and cultural, to destroy the institutions of the humanities and to diminish the legitimacy of humanist reason are not trying to do so because those institutions or that reason are socially ineffective; they are trying to destroy them because of all the social work that they have already done. The attacks on the university that come from the right are not actually attacks on the university in general; no one is proposing to get rid of business schools or accounting departments. They are attacks on the humanities disciplines, for which the university serves as a synecdoche.

Though I am wary of repeating here the overblown and almost always too self-aggrandizing claims about the “value” of the humanities (We’re critical to democracy! We make animals into people!), I do want to draw your attention to the fact that the enemies of the humanities are as responsible for that discourse as humanists are (their version goes, They’re ruining marriage! And America!). I don’t think the humanities matter because they’re beautiful or because they do left politics. I think the humanities matter because they’re a good way of knowing things, and because their way of knowing things has often produced substantial changes in the way all of us think, live our lives, organize our social spheres, and plan for the future. A fundamental rethinking of what it is that humanist

scholars do—and a commitment to thinking through, teaching about, and writing with the basic epistemological strengths of our disciplines—will not diminish us. It will extend us.

* * *

That any such extension might be uncomfortable, that it might in fact release the humanities from their institutional shelters, and demand that humanists create newer, different, and more open ones . . . well, this seems to me to be the price we ought to pay for the ideas we already believe in, as well as the consequences of being responsible to their past and future greatness.