

The Serious Business of the Arts & the Humanities

Much like Business Ethics, the phrase “the business of the humanities and the arts” approaches, at least prima facie, the oxymoronic. The contradiction in terms only seemingly holds as long as we delay in perceiving the valid connections embedded within the incongruity, connections I intend to demonstrate below.

Each time I teach Philosophy 110: Business Ethics to a group of Vanderbilt undergraduates, I have the pleasure of demonstrating through a set of contemporary cases the interconnectedness of business and ethics. The first interconnection is the simple fact that a firm would not be able to fulfill its corporate social responsibility without generating a sufficient profit in order for it to stay in business. Being ethical in business is difficult in the best of scenarios, if not, more likely, impossible, when the firm is unable to pay its employees and suppliers, sell its products or services, and reward its owners, among a set of stakeholder obligations. For example, a smartphone from a bankrupt telecom does not appear so intelligent a choice after all.

A second interconnection can be seen in the many companies who through unethical practices no longer exist. The compelling business models of firms like Enron¹, Lehman Brothers², WorldCom³, Adelphia⁴, and Arthur Andersen⁵ joined the ranks of creatively destroyed businesses, not through Schumpeter’s sense of obsolete technology being superseded by innovation (VHS movies, pay phones, 8 Tracks and cassette tapes), but through illegal and unethical business practices (Ponzi schemes, accounting legerdemain, and embezzlement—and the lack of an ethical notion of acceptable behavior preceding an understanding of the constituents of legal business practices). Shareholder wealth maximization, the activity and the goal of business, is limited by externalities, and ethics is a principal and principled limiting factor.

How does this translate into the necessary connection between business and the humanities and arts that I posited above? Is this simply advocating for a retreat or a selling-out to the dark side? Have the deification of markets and the ideology of business as an authoritative metric in American society led to a hostile takeover of the arts and the humanities? Has art for art’s sake been replaced by the mercantile? Would we argue that the pristine, platonic forms of the humanities and the arts need to get their hands dirty because business has infiltrated every other aspect of lived experience?

Not necessarily, but we must also not glibly state that the humanities and the arts remain unaffected by what has changed. Today, perhaps more than ever, the humanities and the arts are in crisis, not news to anyone in particular given the seemingly permanent state of crisis that has existed for many years, but of late more particularly exacerbated by a host of factors. It is a crisis brought to the boiling point by diminished funding from grants agencies, governments (local, state and federal), philanthropies, or central university budgeting. It is also a crisis abetted by the perception of the arts and the humanities as possessing a lesser value than the more utilitarian, profitable forms of human activity. The salary differential at the same academic rank between a new business- or law-school professor versus a new history of art, theatre, or creative writing professor are good examples to demonstrate that market forces are indeed at work in the academy, too. The oversubscribed undergraduate business courses, as our students seek more vocationally oriented goals at the expense of a liberal education, offer further evidence.

The intention here is not to respond with an anti-business diatribe; it is however to note that the preferred response is to recognize that the status quo is not an option. Inherent in the concept of a “crisis” is the recognition that a problem exists and a decision must be

made. A crisis impels us to jog our abstractions and to devise creative solutions, in the authentic spirit of the arts and the humanities, and in the spirit of *bricolage*, as Lévi-Strauss⁶, Barthes⁷, and Derrida⁸ reminded us, of improvising solutions from what is ready at hand.

As applied here, the concept is motivated by a recognition that a solution must be found, but not one that is merely pragmatic or utilitarian, because those solutions tend to be short term and focused on immediate results. At the same time, we can borrow from business and management and do so without subscribing to the reification and deification of a market economy as long as we are driven by what can help sustain the arts and the humanities. The challenge then becomes how to identify and enact sustainability in these areas, enacting sustainability understood as motivating, allowing to take place, bringing before an audience, and providing for its occasion.

For this I will cite a few examples from my own work at Vanderbilt University, where I am responsible for a number of arts-related projects. An associate dean in the College of Arts & Science, I direct a graduate program in the liberal arts, a Saturday lecture series, summer sessions, and the Fine Arts Gallery. In each case, the focus remains on the arts and humanities, with the boundary of funding as a constant factor in the sustainability of these projects. For the past seven years, my role has been described as the impresario and the entrepreneur for the arts and humanities within the university, understood not in a profit-making mode but as the promoter and producer of such events and occasions that would not likely happen otherwise.

One example can be found in our Saturday University, a lecture series designed to highlight areas of excellence in the liberal arts at Vanderbilt and to attract an audience of alumni and the local Nashville community. Having no budget or funding for this project, we were able to proceed based mainly on the goodwill of colleagues across campus. Each semester, I would work with a group of professors to build a lecture series on a particular topic. Recently, I partnered with colleagues in our MFA program to host a series of poetry workshops conducted by Billy Collins. He was on campus as the poet-in-residence, and agreed to conduct these sessions. More than 160 people attended two consecutive Saturday sessions. Most were teachers in middle- and high schools in the area. And everyone paid a nominal fee to help cover the costs of the workshops. If the concept of adult learners paying to attend a poetry workshop appears counterintuitive, the attendance and the reception settle the case. More importantly, bringing the poetry workshops to the local community in a meaningful context that was not a one-off session or a full semester course was in and of itself one definitive example of promoting the sustainability of the arts and the humanities. Next spring three visiting poets will offer poetry workshops on the Saturdays following their Thursday MFA classes—in much the same way as we did with Billy Collins and with similar results, at least that is the intention and the hope.

A second example can be found in the Vanderbilt Fine Arts Gallery. Because of budget cutbacks, we had not been able to bring traveling art exhibitions to campus. Admittedly, that is a significant problem for a university art museum. In fact, funding issues remain problematic for many areas on campus. At the same time, the museum was charged with (1) ensuring its integration with the academic mission of the university and (2) increasing student engagement with it. Three years ago, by partnering with the First Year Reading Program, for all newly entering students at Vanderbilt, and by identifying an exhibit that linked neatly with the assigned text, we were able to receive funding from the Provost and various deans that allowed us to bring the exhibition to campus. I designed a lesson plan for the faculty and students leading each team of first-year students to guide their visit to the exhibition. One notable result of this partnership can be found in the record number of

students who visited the gallery, enabling us to increase student engagement while also motivating their own experience with the arts. This year marks the third consecutive year for this partnership.

A third example links Saturday University and the Fine Arts Gallery. Many works of art within Vanderbilt's impressive collection have been adopted by the History of Art faculty as important, seminal, and favorite works for study in the classroom. With a Saturday University series in mind, I asked a group from this department to select a work from the collection and to lecture on its place within the tradition or to highlight how this work can be appreciated. Five professors readily responded. Whether it was a Renaissance painting of the Holy Family to present the "sacred conversation" as a genre, a work by Cocteau to present French surrealism, or a Childe Hassam painting to situate "orientalism" and American impressionism, the sessions allowed the participants to view the work in the gallery, see related works on slides and hear the professor lecture on the appreciation and understanding of the aesthetic experience. In effect, another successful venture sustaining and enabling the arts and the humanities.

I will conclude by emphasizing that the business of the arts and the humanities is serious. Without a serious effort, the question remains, can we sustain the arts and the humanities? We cannot assume that things will turn around, funding will reappear, the audiences will come back, the liberal arts will forever retain their rightful place in the center of the academy. We cannot assume anything, but we can seriously work to sustain them.

Notes

¹Stewart Hamilton and Inna Francis, "Enron Collapse." IMD Business School. Case #164-PDF-ENG. (2004) Enron along with the other business failures cited have become standard businesses cases analyzed in business schools and, in the author's case, business ethics courses.

²Anette Mikes, Gwen Yu, and Dominique Hamel, "Lehman Brothers and Repo 105." Harvard Business School . Case #9-112-050. (2011).

³Kamala Gollakota and vipin Gupta, "WorldCom Inc.: What Went Wrong?" Ivey Business School, University of Western Ontario. Case # 905M43. (2005).

⁴Stuart C. Gilson and Belen Villalonga, "Adephia Communications Corp.'s Bankruptcy." Harvard Business School. Case # 208071-PDF-ENG. (2010).

⁵Daniel Diermeier, Robert J. Crawford and Charlotte Snyder, "Arthur Andersen ©: The Collapse of Arthur Andersen." Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University. Case# KEL560-PDF-ENG. (2011).

⁶Calude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968, pp. 16-36.

⁷Roland Barthes, "The Structuralist Activity," *Critical Essays*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000. Pp. 213-220.

⁸Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign & Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," *The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man: The Structuralist Controversy*. Eds. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970. Pp. 247-265.