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Introduction

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Seven lean cows

In chapter 41 of the Book of Genesis, Pharaoh has two troubling dreams. In the first, seven lean cows rise out of the river and devour seven fat cows. And in the second, seven withered ears of grain swallow up seven healthy ears. Pharaoh sends for experts and wise men, but they are unable to interpret these dreams. Then, however, his chief cupbearer tells him of a young captive Jew named Joseph who has proved himself adept in the art of interpretation. Joseph is called for. He suggests that the dreams are predicting that seven years of abundance will be followed by seven years of famine. Pharaoh should accordingly store up surplus food supplies during the good years. He must find a wise and discerning man to take charge of the process. Pharaoh responds by giving the job to Joseph, who builds massive grain stores in the good years, with the result that Egypt thrives during the years of famine – not least by exporting grain to other countries that have not shown such foresight.

In public life in the twenty-first century, the experts who are usually asked to predict the future are scientists (for example, climatologists) and social scientists (for example, economists). The scientists offer warnings that anthropogenic global warming will lead to famine and flood, causing mass migration and widespread disruption to settled ways of life. The economists advise on the setting of bank interest rates as a predictive mechanism for the control of inflation. But scientists cannot yet predict when earthquakes and volcanic eruptions will take place. And economists signally failed to predict the banking crisis of 2008.

Joseph, who did such a good job of predicting the future, was neither a scientist nor an economist. He was an interpreter of narrative, for which another name would be a literary critic. At another level, of course, Joseph is not a real expert but a character within a narrative: the Book of Genesis is not a factual document but a story about the origins and values and cultural identity of the Jewish people. Stories – myths, plays, pictures, novels, histories – are among humankind's chief instruments for understanding ourselves and our world.

The Book of Genesis is one of the foundational texts of the Western and Middle-Eastern worlds. The three great religions that have shaped the history of those worlds – Judaism, Christianity, Islam – all have their origins in the Abrahamic stories that are recorded there. In order to understand the meaning of what we read in Genesis and its sequels we need the expertise of

language scholars (to translate from Hebrew and Greek), of palaeographers and bibliographers (to decipher the manuscript and print traditions that have transmitted the Bible to us), of historians and archaeologists (to locate the Abrahamic narrative in time and place), and of anthropologists and theologians (to explain what the stories tell us about humankind and our need for divinity). There is a collective name for all these experts: a faculty of humanities. In the light of the recent historical developments for which '9/11' serves as shorthand, it was perhaps unfortunate that the swingeing funding cuts to higher education in the early 1980s fell with particular severity on supposedly marginal areas of the humanities such as Islamic Studies.

At one level, Joseph succeeds in predicting the future when all the acknowledged experts have failed because he sticks to common sense. It is not rocket science to see that both the weather and the economy move in cycles and that it is accordingly a good idea to 'put something away for a rainy day' or to build up your financial reserves during the boom years so that you will be better prepared for the recession that will inevitably follow. At another level, the story is much more complicated, tapping into deep archetypal structures of narrative that occur in many different cultures and eras: reversal and recognition, the wisdom of the fool, the exile and the prisoner who rises to power and eminence. The person who appears to be useless turns out to be very valuable indeed.

Joseph's predictive skill is a little allegory of what faculties of humanities can do for society. Humanists look long and hard at the past, and at stories and ideas. They can impart some common sense to our public debates by way of the lessons of the past and the understanding of human nature. But they can also impart some healthy scepticism regarding easy solutions by way of their demonstration that, when humankind is involved, things are usually more complicated than they first seem.

On 'value'

In 2010, a number of governments committed themselves to a new age of austerity. A time of restraint upon public spending is a good moment for asking fundamental questions about value. What are the things that *must* be financed from the public purse? A health service, counter-terrorism, public transport, basic literacy and numeracy, housing for the poor and advanced research into non-carbon energy sources? What possible case could be made for, let us say, the budget of the Arts & Humanities Research Council when measured against these more urgent demands? Should governments that have overspent in the years of plenty continue to spend 'taxpayers' money' funding research into ancient Greek tragedy, philosophical conundrums, the history of landscape, literary value and the aesthetics of design? Is it possible to demonstrate that such research delivers 'value for money' and 'public benefit'? And what exactly *is* research in the humanities? People readily grasp the idea of scientific research (discovering a new star, a new cell, a new

source of fuel, a cure for cancer), but humanities scholars are often met with puzzlement when telling taxi drivers that they conduct 'research'.

There is, however, a simple answer to the question 'what is the value of research in the humanities?' It is that research in the humanities is the only activity that can establish the meaning of such a question.

What do we mean by 'value', by 'research' and by 'the humanities'? These are questions that can only be answered by means of the tools of the disciplines of the humanities. They are questions of semantics and interpretation. And they require philosophical and historical understanding. Language, history, philosophy: the humanities.

By the same account, a further value of research in the humanities is that it is the only activity that can answer the question 'what is the value of research in the sciences?' It is generally assumed that the value of research in the sciences is to advance knowledge so as to improve the quality of human life. The value of medical research is to cure disease, relieve suffering and lengthen life. Among the potential values of research in climatology, biochemistry, physical engineering and several other scientific disciplines might be the discovery of various means to fix an array of environmental problems. But questions such as why we should value long life and what ethical obligations we might have to future generations, to other species, or indeed to the planet itself, are 'humanities' questions, only answerable from within the framework of disciplines that are attentive to language, history and philosophy.

In Act 2, Scene II of Shakespeare's rigorously intellectual (and wildly bawdy) tragedy *Troilus and Cressida*, the Trojan lords debate whether it is worth fighting a war for the sake of the beautiful Helen. Hector proposes that 'she is not worth what she doth cost / The keeping.' 'What's aught but as 'tis valued?' asks Troilus in reply. 'Value' here is initially conceived in economic terms. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* – an essential product of humanities research – the primary meaning of the word value is 'That amount of some commodity, medium of exchange, etc., which is considered to be an equivalent for something else; a fair or adequate equivalent or return. [As in the] phr[ase] value for money (freq[ue]ntly attrib[uted], used metaphorically)'. Value, then, is a term referring to a commodity, a medium of exchange, something quantifiable. It is interpreted in terms of the market, of 'economic impact'. According to this argument, there will always come a point where the price is simply not worth paying.

Hector, though, comes back with a counter-argument that shifts the meaning of the term:

But value dwells not in particular will:
It holds his estimate and dignity
As well wherein 'tis precious of itself
As in the prizer. 'Tis mad idolatry

To make the service greater than the god. (Shakespeare, Act 2, Scene 2, lines 58–62)

The word ‘value’ must now be understood in the light of another of its definitions in the *Oxford English Dictionary*:

The relative status of a thing, or the estimate in which it is held, according to its real or supposed worth, usefulness, or importance. In Philos[ophy] and Social Sciences, regarded esp[ecially] in relation to an individual or group; gen[erally] in pl[ural], the principles or standards of a person or society, the personal or societal judgement of what is valuable and important in life.

The relativism of Troilus (things only have value in so far as they are valued by particular people who prize them and who can accordingly put a price on them) is replaced by the proposition that there can be essential values, that a thing might be intrinsically valuable (‘precious of itself’). As the dictionary definition reminds us, this essentialism may eventually have to be dissolved into another relativism: ‘society’ will make judgements as to ‘what is valuable and important in life’. We need historians, anthropologists and researchers in comparative literature to show us how different societies have different values. Shakespeare, following Montaigne, was very interested in the idea that what one society regards as the product of ‘nature’, another society will regard as mere ‘custom’. In a world of globalized communication, international exchange and migratory labour, this knowledge of difference is especially important.

But every society has gods of one kind and another. In response to the commodified understanding of value with which he and Troilus began, Hector reminds us that it is mad idolatry to make the service greater than the god. This is as if to say: a merely economic understanding of value makes the service – the instrumentality – greater than the thing served, the real value. The value of humanities research is to identify the nature of the god.

In the arena of higher education in the early twenty-first century, the relationship between the service and the god appears to be changing. Universities had their origins in the service of first the church (the centrality of theology in the medieval curriculum) and then the state (the idea extending from Tudor reforms to the last days of the British Empire that one of the primary functions of universities was to form the minds of civil administrators). But for Cardinal Newman at the high water mark of the Victorian era, the *idea* of the university was premised upon a god: the university was ‘a place of teaching universal knowledge’ (Newman 1852: v). Historically, the idea of ‘education’, deriving from ‘*educere*’, the Latin for ‘to lead out’, is intimately bound to the notion of character formation. The model for the university tutorial is the classical sage – Plato in his academy or Epicurus

in his garden – in dialogue with his pupils, imparting wisdom by example and through training in the art of argument. The platonic university is a place where young people learn to think. Their starting-point must be the art of thinking disinterestedly, not instrumentally.

The Victorians were the first generation in this country to believe that the state should be the principal agency to take responsibility for education. They created a government department to oversee the process. Whilst the main educational business of nineteenth-century politicians and civil servants was the provision of universal school education, they also initiated processes that led to the reform of Oxford and Cambridge, and the growth of civic universities elsewhere, especially in the north. Interestingly, the running in this latter regard was made within local, not national, government – a model worth pondering in the context of the various other kinds of devolution that are reshaping our society today.

Victorian educational ideals in general and Cardinal Newman's idea of the university in particular are a far cry from the rhetoric of the servants of the early twenty-first century British government who are responsible for the funding of higher education. If a Tardis were to transport Newman to the year 2010, so that he could attend his own beatification by the Pope in the Archdiocese of Birmingham, he would be surprised to discover that universities come within the remit not of the Department of Education but of the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). The function of the modern university is now officially linked not to 'teaching universal knowledge' but to 'the innovation and skills agenda'. Crudely put, academic research must pay its way by generating real returns in the wider economy.

One of the big new ideas is 'knowledge transfer'. This is defined on the website of Research Councils UK (RCUK), the quango charged by BIS with the delivery of research funding, as 'improving exploitation of the research base to meet national economic and public service objectives', to be achieved by means of 'people and knowledge flow', together with 'commercialisation, including Intellectual Property exploitation and entrepreneurial activities'. These ambitions do sound very much like the service becoming greater than the god: the predominant language ('exploitation', 'economic', 'commercialisation', 'entrepreneurial') is that of the commodity and the marketplace.

However, even in the hard sciences, the relationship between original research and commercial exploitation is usually indirect and long-term. More than half a century passed between Arthur C. Clarke's visionary conception of the communication potential of orbital satellites and the massive economic impact of the manufacture and sale of GPS devices to individual motorists. Medical research, too, has a long history of vast sums of money being spent on journeys up blind alleys, with new breakthroughs often coming by chance in quite unexpected places. Ciclosporin (formerly Cyclosporin), the immunosuppressive agent that revolutionized organ transplantation, was

discovered as part of a general screening programme, not through a funded research project specifically addressing the problem of graft rejection. Medical history is full of stories of this kind.

Government and its officers have a prime duty to account for the expenditure of taxpayers' money, but in measuring the value of research a much subtler style of accountancy is required. There is something especially inappropriate about the attempt to *quantify* the 'value' and 'impact' of work in the humanities in economic terms, since the very nature of the humanities is to address the messy, debatable and unquantifiable but essentially human dimensions of life, such as history, beauty, imagination, faith, truth, goodness, justice and freedom. The only test of a philosophical argument, an historical hypothesis or an aesthetic judgement is time – a long period of time, not the duration of a government spending review.

One phrase in the RCUK definition of 'knowledge transfer' stands out: 'exploitation of the research base to meet national economic and public service objectives'. Public service, a concept most often used in relation to the charter of the BBC ('public service broadcasting'), comes from a different lexicon to that of economic objectives and commercial exploitation. It actually takes us back to some of the historical functions of the university. Like the BBC, the universities are in the business of *educere* as a public service. In this regard, their most significant form of 'knowledge transfer' goes under another name: teaching.

One of the most important answers to the question of what kind of public service is provided by humanities research is that it feeds into teaching: in good universities, research questions emerge through teaching and new hypotheses are tested out on students. An artificial barrier between research and teaching in the provision of government funding for universities – exacerbated by the impact of the 'Research Assessment Exercise' that has determined funding for the past two decades – has obscured this obvious answer. The division is sometimes justified on the grounds that the university teacher needs only 'scholarship', not new 'research', but such a distinction between scholarship and research simply does not hold water in any humanities discipline. To take an example from one of the most widely studied humanities disciplines, English literature: to teach a literary work well at university level, one requires a good text of that work; the establishment and creation of such texts through the discipline of textual bibliography is a highly advanced, technical and time-consuming form of research (my new recension of the text of Shakespeare's complete works required more than fifteen person years' research time); the resulting product cannot be described as 'merely a textbook' in the way that synthesis of existing scientific or medical knowledge into a textbook for students could be described as 'scholarship' rather than 'research'.

The primary impact of humanities research will always be within the educational system – which now means the global educational market. The universities that promote the best research and scholarship in the

humanities will attract graduate students from around the world, thus greatly stimulating the economy and increasing our international competitiveness. The universities that build research into the undergraduate 'learning experience' will produce the most able students, who will bring their 'innovation' and 'skills' to every sector of the economy. A variety of metrics have provided empirical demonstration that UK humanities researchers lead the world in their disciplines, and that the quality of research and graduate education in British universities attracts overseas graduate students who bring a benefit of at least £2 billion a year to the UK economy (Arts & Humanities Research Council 2009: 11–13).

The relationship between academic research and teaching is paramount, but other answers are also needed to the question of the value of humanities research of the kind that is funded by Research Councils UK. I polled a random sample of colleagues, within my own university and beyond, with a hypothetical question (developing the art of posing hypothetical questions is, of course, another of the values of the humanities):

Imagine a civil servant responsible for the distribution of the research budget. Imagine them saying 'I don't lose any sleep at night over the spending of taxpayers' money on medical research, but I do lose sleep over the spending of it on humanities research; I like riding my horse, but I don't expect the taxpayer to pay for me to do so.' Imagine, then, that you have the ear of that civil servant, or for that matter the minister to whom they report, for a few sentences. What will you say to help them to rest more easily at night on this matter of the taxpayer and humanities research?

Here are the – representative – replies of ten colleagues:

1. Britain is a major world centre of publishing and intellectual life. Research in humanities makes possible the intellectual property and the cultural institutions that sustain this position. Without British humanities academics there would be no *Oxford English Dictionary*, no *Macmillan Dictionary of Art*, no *Grove Dictionary of Music*, no *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, no Oxford Classical Texts, all of which are sold on to the world and whose publication in turn guarantees Britain's place as a world intellectual centre. Furthermore, humanities research provides an infrastructure that maintains Britain's place as an intellectual and cultural centre, a place of publishing and reviewing, which enriches the work of our composers, artists, playwrights and novelists, whilst attracting creators from other countries and cultures to live here. We abandon this at our peril.
2. Humanities research engenders and fosters *critical thinking*, which is indispensable to innovative work in any field whatsoever.
3. One of the research councils' strategic priorities is 'global security'. If George W. Bush's and Tony Blair's security and strategic advisors had

been educated in the historical research of Erez Manela, the world would be a less dangerous place (see Mishra 2008).

4. To a person dying from cancer, the 'cure for cancer' is abstract and meaningless. It will only come after they are dead. What is needed by a dying person, beside the palliative medical care that is now available, are resources for working through their grief and anger and fear. Recent research in 'bibliotherapy' suggests that reading – reading in groups in particular – provides an extremely effective (and cost-effective) resource for this purpose. That is hardly surprising. The links between poetry and mental health have long been established. After all, William Wordsworth was the effective inventor of cognitive behavioural therapy – an initiative that has proved to be highly economic and effective. It is not entirely frivolous to suggest that literature offers public benefit in the arena of healthcare.
5. If the civil servant's horse-riding were of a standard to make her a potential Olympic competitor, wouldn't the taxpayer be content to fund her? National prestige need not be confined to sport: What is the objection to funding the research that allows our best historians, literary scholars, classicists and philosophers to be the Olympians of their disciplines?
6. A great deal of humanities research has to do with the question of how we have come to be who we are and what we might come to be as a community in the future – locally, nationally and globally. Government nowadays frequently asks questions about 'Britishness' and cultural identity: these are questions that can only be answered with any rigour through the historical and analytic perspectives offered by research in the humanities.
7. Anyone who thinks the arts and humanities are equivalent to leisure activities should probably stop using the word 'education' and just say 'training' instead. University teaching and research in the arts and humanities are essential to the maintenance of cultural heritage and cultural value. Only university teaching that is directly informed by high-quality research can sustain standards of international excellence. The fact that medical research requires money is no argument for reducing the money for other kinds of research to zero. What can the beneficiaries of advances in medical science do with the health they retain or recover? Read books, debate ideas, go to plays and movies, develop their capacity for thinking, speaking and writing – at work no less than at play. These are activities to which teaching in the arts and humanities – and the research that underpins and extends it – makes an essential contribution.
8. For every pound that the UK government spends on supporting academic work in the arts and humanities, it spends twenty-five on research into destroying human beings (the Arts & Humanities

Research Council budget is around £100 million, the Ministry of Defence Research Budget is £2.5 billion, almost exactly equal to that of the seven RCUK research councils put together). Work in the humanities includes what Matthew Arnold called 'disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that has been known and thought in the world'. Are we to deprive future generations of that learning and propagation? But the humanities do not end there. They include understanding ourselves and other peoples through the language, literature, art, music, history, religion, philosophy, sense of identity, politics, desires, fears and ambitions, all of which animate ourselves and others, whether these are the best or not. We are asked whether this understanding is a public good, deserving public support, or merely a private hobby. The answer is that if you believe knowledge is too expensive, try ignorance. The human world is one in which we move and act, just as much as the natural world, which is the object of science. Misunderstanding either is the road to catastrophe; understanding each of them is our only salvation.

9. Your analogy with horse riding is fallacious since it implies that humanities research is purely recreational and confers no public good. However, the slightest acquaintance with the history of ideas supplies numerous examples of curiosity driven enquiry in the humanities having great social consequences. For example, Bertrand Russell's philosophical investigations into logic and language paved the way for the artificial languages essential to computer science; historical and cultural research fills bookshelves and museums that would otherwise be empty; and, in general, the knowledge and learning of the universities inspires cultural production and artistic endeavour. Exposure to the intellectual culture of academic research enriches the lives of countless students whose education would be greatly impoverished were they not taught by active scholars. Finally, a great proportion of academic books, journals and presses originate in the UK, and many students and foreign academics visit our shores only because of the academics that study in our public universities. Many jobs are created to service their needs while they are here and then there are the fees and taxes they pay. The total budget of the Arts & Humanities Research Council for a year is less than the cost of the average completely failed and written off National Health Service IT initiative.
10. A personal anecdote: something that pleased me more than anything for a long time was an email out of the blue from a Syrian asking permission to translate my little book *Think* (Blackburn 1999) into Arabic; he pleaded that there was no royalty he could pay, but he thought the Islamic world desperately needed an introduction to secular philosophy. Given the billions that the military option wastes, I think I can claim at least a small probability of being economically more efficient!

The purpose of the chapters in this book – a deliberately eclectic mix of case studies and reflective essays – is to offer a wide range of examples of humanities research in action, so demonstrating the strength of the many and varied claims made by my respondents.

Bentham v Coleridge

Several of the respondents make a comparison or contrast between military spending and spending on humanities research. These would appear to be two very different spheres of public life, but the juxtaposition is worth pursuing.

One of the values of humanities research is that it teaches us that all controversies have historical precedents – the lessons of which we are very good at ignoring. The debate between those who look for the ‘economic impact’ of academic research and those who appeal to the pursuit of knowledge as a civilizing virtue replicates a dichotomy identified by John Stuart Mill in the early Victorian era, in his pair of essays on Jeremy Bentham (written in 1838) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1840).

Mill contends that Bentham and Coleridge are the two ‘great seminal minds’ of the age. Britain, he proposes, is indebted to them ‘not only for the greater part of the important ideas which have been thrown into circulation among its thinking men in their time, but for a revolution in its general modes of thought and investigation’. Bentham and Coleridge, he argues:

were destined to renew a lesson given to mankind by every age, and always disregarded – to show that speculative philosophy, which to the superficial appears a thing so remote from the business of life and the outward interests of men, is in reality the thing on earth which most influences them, and in the long run overbears every other influence save those which it must itself obey. The writers of whom we speak have never been read by the multitude; except for the more slight of their works, their readers have been few: but they have been the teachers of the teachers; there is hardly to be found in England an individual of any importance in the world of mind, who (whatever opinions he may have afterwards adopted) did not first learn to think from one of these two. (Leavis 1959: 39)

To effect a revolution in ‘general modes of thought’; to inhabit a realm (‘speculative philosophy’) that seems utterly remote from ‘the business of life’ and yet to influence society more than anyone else; to be ‘the teachers of the teachers’; to be the figures from whom all serious minds ‘learn to think’ – even if these claims were to be greatly diluted, the implication would still be that the intellectual work of Bentham and Coleridge was of extraordinary value to society, although its *direct* impact (in terms of the number of people who read their major books) was minimal. Their importance is in itself is a salutary warning against the danger of taking the short view of the question of public value.

What, then, were their great innovations? Bentham, says Mill, was ‘the great *critical* thinker of his age and country’, ‘the great questioner of things established’. He was the iconoclast who was no respecter of institutions and traditions. A latter-day Benthamite might well say: Why should we fund research in the humanities just because we have funded it in the past? Bentham, continues Mill, ‘introduced into morals and politics those habits of thought and modes of investigation, which are essential to the idea of science’. A latter-day Benthamite might very well say: Prove the value of what you do by *quantifying* it. Be precise, be empirical, do not rely on windy rhetoric. Give me a *metric*. Famously, Bentham’s utilitarian principle was ‘the greatest happiness of the greatest number’. If push-pin (a children’s game) gives happiness to more people than poetry, then push-pin is more valuable than poetry. ‘Quantity of pleasure being equal, push-pin is as good as poetry.’ In this view, quantity – or, as we would now say, ‘access’ or ‘inclusion’ – trumps intellectual athleticism and aesthetic value. By this logic, government might well find itself subsidizing access to push-pin’s modern equivalents – computer games – and leaving poetry to the mercy of the market.

Mill admires the modernity and the democracy of Bentham’s utilitarian position, but deplores its lack of imagination: ‘He committed the mistake of supposing that the business part of human affairs was the whole of them.’ Bentham failed to take into account other aspects under which human activities should be judged – the moral, the aesthetic and the sympathetic (a modern term for the latter might be ‘the socially cohesive’). Bentham must therefore be balanced against Coleridge.

Whereas Bentham began by asking of every received opinion ‘Is it true?’, Coleridge began by asking ‘What is the meaning of it?’ How can society foster those dimensions of human life that Benthamite utilitarianism cannot account for – the ethical, the beautiful, the cohesive force? Through the creation, Coleridge suggests, ‘of an endowed class, for the cultivation of learning, and for diffusing its results among the community’. Mill describes how, in his treatise *On the Constitution of the Church and State*, Coleridge (who was actually developing an idea first put forward in Germany by Friedrich Schiller) proposed that there should be what he termed a ‘nationalty’ or ‘national property’ in the form of a fund – derived from taxation – dedicated to ‘the advancement of knowledge, and the civilization of the community’. This national fund should support and maintain what he called a ‘clerisy’, a kind of secular clergy, with the following duties:

A certain smaller number were to remain at the fountain-heads of the humanities, in cultivating and enlarging the knowledge already possessed, and in watching over the interests of physical and moral science; being likewise the instructors of such as constituted, or were to constitute, the remaining more numerous classes of the order.

The members of this latter and far more numerous body were to be distributed throughout the country, so as not to leave even the smallest integral part or division without a resident guide, guardian, and instructor; the objects and final intention of the whole order being these – to preserve the stores and to guard the treasures of past civilization, and thus to bind the present with the past; to perfect and add to the same, and thus to connect the present with the future; but especially to diffuse through the whole community, and to every native entitled to its laws and rights, that quantity and quality of knowledge which was indispensable both for the understanding of those rights, and for the performance of the duties correspondent; finally, to secure for the nation, if not a superiority over the neighbouring states, yet an equality at least, in that character of general civilization, which equally with, or rather more than, fleets, armies, and revenue, forms the ground of its defensive and offensive power. (Coleridge 1972: 34)

Researchers and teachers in the humanities are of value to the state if and when they fulfil the function of the Coleridgean clerisy. They must remember, though, that they are a form of ‘national property’: their work must be for the benefit not of themselves but of the entire nation. Reading Coleridge’s definition of the clerisy in the light of twenty-first century debates about research funding, what is most striking is the huge emphasis that he places on what is now called ‘dissemination’. The results of our research must be ‘distributed throughout the country, so as not to leave even the smallest integral part or division without a resident guide, guardian, and instructor’.

The investment must be large, the responsibility – the public duty – placed upon the latter-day clerisy is heavy, but in the ‘knowledge economy’ and faced with the global insecurity of the twenty-first century, the return on the investment is potentially vast. Even more than in Coleridge’s day, the work of the clerisy in binding past, present and future, in yoking inheritance to aspiration and tradition to innovation, and in maintaining the understanding of ‘those rights’ and ‘correspondent duties’ that are at the core of national identity, can play a major role in ‘securing for the nation’ that ‘character of general civilization, which equally with, or rather more than, fleets, armies, and revenue, forms the ground of its defensive and offensive power’.

Research in the humanities is often regarded as a superficial ornament of society. Those who undertake it are sometimes accused of obscurantism, of being all too eager to show off the amazing technicolor dreamcoat of their academic jargon at the expense of communicating clearly with a wide public. But if Coleridge is to be believed, it might just be that among the faculties of humanities we will find the Josephs who will guide us through the seven lean years.

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