A Professional Transmigration

Applying the Humanities. DANIEL CALLAHAN, ARTHUR L. CAPLAN, and BRUCE JENNINGS, Eds. Plenum, New York, 1985. xvi, 329 pp. $39.50. Hastings Center Series in Ethics.

Since historians are conspicuous among the contributors to *Applying the Humanities*, it is appropriate for a reviewer who is one of them to ply his trade openly and ask the usual questions. What is the reason for the appearance of this book and what stimulated the obviously vigorous, informed, and impressive conversations that preceded its publication? Why did the Hastings Center believe it was time to publish?

The Center's own answer is that trained humanists, whose historic home in modern times has been the university, have been moving toward outside occupations where their presence is rare enough to warrant comment. Thus new questions need to be asked of the humanities. Their impact in new settings—such as the courtroom, the boardroom, the hospital and clinic, the policy-making seminar—has to be measured, assessed. The reverse is also necessary: an evaluation of the influence of the outside world of give-and-take on what have normally been considered traditional or autonomous subjects. The discussions in both instances are good and deserve to be commended.

If humanists are moving into unconventional fields, what impels them? A number of answers are possible. After the postwar boom in graduate education, contraction began in the 1970's. The academy, experiencing inflation and often falling enrollments, could no longer absorb its own graduate specialists. New opportunities were sought by enterprising and alert Ph.D.'s in history, philosophy, language, literature, and art. In some cases—one is described here—demand led supply.

To seek new forms of occupation because one needs a job is hardly unworthy. Unquestionably it is painful to flail on one's own. Hence the humanities are almost tiresomely described as "in crisis" or, as in the essay by Eric Cassell of Cornell, as taking a battering these days, or, as historians will sometimes complain but here allow a sociologist to say for them, as forced to serve a culture poor in memory and willfully ignorant of its past.

But constraint can have a positive as well as a negative dimension. Art has not necessarily suffered because the requirements of form or personal circumstances may restrict the number of ready options; and the theory of the market and the action of market incentives presuppose willingness to enter into combat.

A fuller historical explanation for the readiness of some humanists to colonize the nonacademic world requires mention of several other factors, one large, the other more local. The first is the transformation of advanced industrial society into a culture where service is broadly defined to include almost every imaginable aspect of personal comfort, health, and self-realization. The second is the trauma suffered by American culture in the aftermath of Selma and the Vietnam War, which has reinforced the demand (or desire) for outside intervention into private life and has produced numerous prescriptions and remedies for our national ills. The current situation, therefore, invites books and commentaries such as *Applying the Humanities*.

But what are the humanities, and are their qualities so special as to merit lengthy discussion, apart from the need to explain their involvement with sectors of institutional life hitherto unserved by them? The answers given in this collection are generally affirmative, but it is important to notice the occasional hesitation, itself an echo of one part of the tangled humanistic inheritance which regards the human condition as problematical. More conventionally, the humanities are said to promote particular skills: language facility, ways of understanding literature, methods for evaluating certain categories of information, a sensitivity to words and shades of meaning, an enlargement of the powers of description. The humanities are also an outlook on life: they keep tradition, hence memory, alive; they encourage a respect for alternatives and caution us not to confuse the latest with the best, not to pursue novelty for its own sake. They provide a sense of complexity and wholeness, not the simplemindedness of a beguiling but false clarity such as Mark Miller of Johns Hopkins attributes to television, which he incites humanists to smite from hip to thigh. The humanities enlarge or instruct us in our humanity by suggesting habits of thinking different from those to be found in the clinical world or the world of social engineering.

This is no mean list of possibilities. Whether the humanities can achieve these ends, especially a healthy view of complexity and contradiction, is another matter. For, as several contributors recognize, the line between exhorting and doing is deceptively easy to cross. Indulging in the former, humanists may actually believe they have succeeded in the latter, but in fact the pitfalls are many. The humanities have been and continue to be permeated by disturbing cultural contradictions. Robert Bellah of Berkeley refers to the late Lionel Trilling's horrified observation that art can subvert received or ideal values. Critical thought, which is the special mission of a liberal arts curriculum, encourages negative attitudes as much as positive ones. There is also the awkward interpenetration of the humanities with contemporary political ideologies, making the question of value-free learning rather more important than is assumed by the contributors. The humanities—shall we date the change from Epicurus and Aulus Gellius or the Italian Renaissance or the Romantic Rebellion or the fragmentation of the American Council of Learned Societies in 1923?—have become identified with possessive individualism. Less charitably, they are articles of consumption in plain or fancy wrappers.

Furthermore, the humanistic tradition is at war with itself. More and more authors of the 1980's are attempting to restore to American life another and older tradition usually called civic humanism. The concern here is less with the rights and privileges of individuals or their private needs and more with the responsibilities of enlightened citizenship or notions of community. This tradition advocates "application" of the humanities to the helping professions or to other areas of the service sector.

A tradition divided against itself, especially a tradition that manages to undermine the bonding and stabilizing institutions in society, is not appealing. Those who cling to the idea that the humanities offer a special vision should not be altogether surprised when some of the loftier claims are rebuffed. Nor should they be surprised if students (and colleges) are in a mood to strengthen the so-called vocational subjects. After all, isn't it the burden of this volume to demonstrate that the humanities are useful?

All knowledge is by definition useful, insofar as it adds something to the life of the user: a skill, a proficiency, a viewpoint, a perspective, an identity, or a meaning. Knowledge may be more or less applicable to a given career, but that is entirely a separate issue. One major "problem" faced by the humanities is that because of academic habits of compartmentalism and discipline-building they have become identified with values, trends, and fads at variance with messages some moralists wish to send. Before the First World War the distinguished poet and critic A. E. Housman wrote that literature was lying and that it was preferable for the literary practitioner to espouse

the definition of truth associated with the hard sciences.

However much I may agree with many of the authors participating in the Hastings Center discussions on ethics in society that a stronger presence of the humanities in nonacademic settings is desirable, I must also express disquiet. The humanities are deeply flawed, which is precisely why advocates always pluck from an unmanageable corpus of thought, institutions, and values those virtues in agreement with their predispositions and remedies. The reader forewarned, I can now say that I myself am most comfortable with humanistic teaching that singles out those productions of history, philosophy, art, and literature that illuminate or ennoble the human condition but am not very comfortable with activities that further the well-being of particular disciplines because they rank as humanities in an inherited taxonomy. No subject is inherently humanistic. That label must be earned by engagement in circumstances involving difficult moral roles, impossible choices, and dilemmas. The sense of quiet struggle that elevates life and lends it dignity cannot be acquired on the cheap.

Seen in this way, it appears as if the "applied humanities" may be a leg up on the academicians.

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Engineers in the Social Order

Mechanics of the Middle Class. Work and Politics among American Engineers. ROBERT ZUSSMAN. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1985. viii, 269 pp. $27.50.

This book analyzes the work, the career paths, the social position, and the political potential of American engineers, an occupational group that the author sees as prototypical of the middle levels both of industry and of our society. The book is based on six months of fieldwork in two companies, one a metalworking firm representative of "old" industry and the other the electronics division of a "new" high-tech business. The author observed engineers at work and interviewed 40 of them in each firm.

The argument of the book is unsurprising. The author frames a great deal of his discussion in refutation of earlier theories and speculations about the role of engineers in our social order. Although he signals early on his own suspicion of such ideas, he returns repeatedly to two notions. He argues that engineers, contrary to some fantasies of the political left, have not become "proletarianized," that is suffered such a devaluation of skills or economic position that they identify with labor. Nor have they, as some social scientists have predicted, become "professionalized," that is developed a solidarity based on shared, self-conscious guardianship of applied science. Rather, the author finds engineers principally concerned with their own careers; whether in old industries or new, they have no particular loyalties either to specific organizations or to engineering itself. They respond, as do most other groups in big organizations, to the premiums that bureaucracy places on administrative skills. In short, most engineers want to become managers; as it happens, this is an ambition more likely to be fulfilled in positions requiring technical supervision rather than executive leadership. Thus, as a group, engineers are a poor bet to become the core of a "new working class" that might transform the American class structure; they are even less likely to emerge as the defenders of some sort of "higher rationality" of technological efficiency that might challenge the irrationalities of the profit-maximizing business ethos.

However, the author believes that engineers might represent a different, still emergent social phenomenon. Engineers try to compartmentalize work from life, adopting a nine-to-five orientation toward their jobs; yet they are distinctly middle-class, locked into generally stable, orderly careers. Zussman thus sees engineers as examples of a "working middle class." In such a view, the social consciousness and eventual political action of engineers and other middle-level groups is shaped not by their work but by particular interests that touch their lives through their families or places of residence—like the quality of schools or property taxes. In closing, he suggests therefore a "moratorium on industrial anthropology" for those concerned with the "broader issues" of stratification and its social and political consequences. He feels that the "bounded world" of the plant cannot give us insight into the multiple social identities that the working class and, in particular, the middle levels form in their residential communities.

In my own view, few people seem able to escape "the long arm of the job," as Martin Meissner once put it, whatever public claims they make to the contrary. Bureaucratic work, in fact, shapes consciousness in decisive ways. Among other things, it regularizes people's experiences of time by engaging them on a daily basis in rational, socially approved purposive action; it brings them into daily proximity with and subordination to authority; it shapes their measures of prestige and overall social status; and, in the case of engineers and particularly of the managers they hope to become, it places a premium on a pervasively pragmatic habit of mind. Such aspects of consciousness seem scarcely unimportant for an understanding of social stratification, social integration, or eventual political action or passivity. Instead of fewer studies, we need, I think, more detailed, better-framed, and especially more imaginative analyses of how work shapes consciousness and the social world.

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Processes of Persuasion

Psychology and Deterrence. ROBERT JERVIS, RICHARD NED LEBOW, and JANICE GROSS STEIN, with PATRICK M. MORGAN and JACK L. SNYDER. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1986. xii, 271 pp. $27.50. Perspectives on Security.

After 40 years of nuclear peace, it may be tempting to take deterrence for granted. Such optimism may be misplaced, despite the success we have enjoyed thus far and the deductive elegance of the "theory" that explains it. In this collection of essays, three political scientists marry psychology and history to argue that the standard version of deterrence theory is far too simple to be of much use as a predictive theory or policy tool. Worse still, their study suggests that the traditional explanation for "how deterrence works" may be dangerously misleading if political leaders do not recognize its limitations.

As their title implies, the authors view deterrence as a psychological process; it is the act of persuading opponents not to take a specified action by threatening to punish them if they do. According to the classic deterrence model, the decision to challenge a deterrent threat is the result of a rational calculation: do the prospective gains outweigh the likely costs? Jervis begins by noting the obvious flaw in this conception: political leaders rarely make "rational" calculations. Information is usually ambiguous, decision makers lack the time necessary to survey all their options completely, and the