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Introduction

It is something of a commonplace these days that the humanities are facing a crisis, or at the very least find themselves having, in the words of Bruno Latour, "run out of steam" (2004). In the decades leading up to the end of the millennium, "Theory" triumphantly swept through the core humanities departments – not just literature departments but also anthropology, sociology, religious studies, art history, media and area studies, and large swaths of classics and history departments. It left in its wake a global suspicion of any sort of truth-claim, coupled with a fervent conviction that the distinguishing mark of "sophisticated" scholarship was an ability to engage with a prescribed pantheon of theorists. Now that the headiness of this intellectual revolution has worn off, an intellectual hangover appears to have set in. The application of theory to its object of analysis, for instance, has grown stultifyingly routinized and mechanical, characterized by precisely the kind of rigidity and deference to authority from which Theory was to liberate us. It was quite exciting the first time someone took the tools of analysis that Derrida originally applied to Rousseau or Plato and aimed them at a piece of modern Chinese literature (I am old enough to remember that!). The expansion of deconstruction to encompass media images and packaging – the absorption of *everything* into the world of text – also felt new and deliciously revolutionary in its initial stages.

Decades down the line, though, it is perhaps not unreasonable to ask if the world really needs one more application of Derridean deconstruction to some as yet unexamined corner of popular culture or the traditional canon. More importantly, if we *do* need it, to what end? It is hard to sustain the intellectual momentum of a theoretical playfulness that denies the validity of theory, or an interest in opulent, impenetrable prose that denies the existence of anything beyond luxuriating in language for language's sake. It also rather takes the wind out of one's intellectual sails when, as Latour (2004) notes, one's radically skeptical critique can be so easily coopted by one's enemies – the "Right," corporate culture, and other "bad guys" – for their own nefarious purposes, such as denying the reality of global warming or selling slave labor–produced sneakers to gullible teenagers. It is therefore not hard to see why intelligent undergraduates, often drawn to the study of literature or art or language by the love of the subject material itself, find themselves repelled by the militant theoretical indoctrination with which this material is served up,

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or wondering what the point of it all might be. Moreover, told that they had better master Irigaray and Kristeva before they can go on to study early modern Chinese literature or Henry David Thoreau at a "serious" level, it is not surprising that accounting or biotechnology might start looking a bit more appealing to a bright and ambitious twenty-two-year-old. Enrollments in the humanities are down, funding levels from external agencies have fallen, and the work of humanists themselves has become increasingly insular and unrelated to normal canons of intelligibility.

The aging vanguard of the Theory revolution are not unaware of the problems currently facing the humanities,[1] but for all their apparent concern they seem perversely determined to block off the one promising route forward. For instance, Brian Boyd (2006) cites a piece by the well-known writer Louis Menand, who recently complained in one of the mouthpieces of the revolution, the Modern Language Association's *Profession 2005*, that the field of literary studies has entered a moribund stage:

> The profession is not reproducing itself so much as cloning itself. One sign that this is happening is that there appears to be little change in dissertation topics in the last ten years. Everyone seems to be writing the same dissertation, and with a tool kit that has not altered much since around 1990. (Menand 2005: 13)

Menand argues cogently that the orthodoxy of postmodernist and poststructuralist theory is intellectually suffocating literature departments across the world, and that what the field needs is some new young Turks unafraid to shake up the status quo and introduce new theoretical directions. What these innovations may look like he, as an old-timer, does not hazard to predict. Despite this apparent intellectual humility in the face of the coming generation, though, Boyd notes that there is at least one innovation with which Menand will explicitly have no truck: the attempt to establish "consilience" between science and the humanities – that is, to integrate science and the humanities into one single, vertical chain of explanation. "Consilience," Menand declares with religious fervor, "is a bargain with the devil" (14). As Boyd observes, for all Menand claims to be looking for someone to tell him and his colleagues that they are wrong, he is "certain that there is at least one thing that just *cannot* be wrong: that the sciences, especially the life sciences, have no place in the study of the human world" (Boyd 2006: 19).

TWO WORLDS: THE GHOST AND THE MACHINE

Menand's attitude is typical of what I think of as the "High Humanist" stance, which holds that the humanities are a sui generis and autonomous field of inquiry,

[1] See especially the essays dedicated to the "future of criticism" published in *Critical Theory* 30.2 (Winter 2004).

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approachable only by means of a special sensitivity produced by humanistic training itself. Whence this knee-jerk, visceral disdain for the very idea of consilience between science and the humanities? What is so special about the human world, the "cultural dimension" that is constitutive of our "species identity" (Menand 2005: 14–15)? To answer these questions it is necessary to clearly trace the culture-nature distinction back to its roots in a dualistic model of the human being.

The university today is, as we know, divided into two broad magisteria, the humanities and the natural sciences, usually located on opposites sides of campus, served by separate funding agencies, and characterized by radically different methodologies and background theoretical assumptions. Although rarely explicitly acknowledged in our secular age, the primary rationale behind this division is a rather old-fashioned and decidedly metaphysical belief: that there are two utterly different types of substances in the world, mind and matter, which operate according to distinct principles. The humanities study the products of the free and unconstrained spirit or mind – literature, religion, art, history – while the natural sciences concern themselves with the deterministic laws governing the inert kingdom of dumb objects. This relationship of metaphysics to institutional structure is expressed most honestly in German, where the sciences of mechanistic nature (*Naturwissenschaften*) are distinguished from the sciences of the elusive human *Geist* (*Geisteswissenschaften*) – *Geist* being a cognate of the English "ghost," and alternately translatable as "ghost," "mind," or "spirit." German also helpfully provides us with technical terms, always hovering somewhere in the background of contemporary humanistic debate, to distinguish clearly between the two types of knowing appropriate to each domain. The natural world is subject to *Erklären*, or "explanation," which is necessarily reductive, explaining complex physical phenomena in terms of simpler ones. Products of the human mind, however, can be grasped only by means of the mysterious communication that occurs when one *Geist* opens itself up to the presence of another *Geist*. This process is known as *Verstehen*, or "understanding," and it is seen as an *event*, requiring sensitivity, openness, and a kind of commitment on the part of one spirit to another. This is the fundamental intuition motivating the High Humanist conviction that only trained humanists can seriously engage in humanistic inquiry. It is also the framework behind the common charge that any attempt to explain a human-level phenomenon in terms of more basic principles is "reductionistic": the understood spirit must be able to see itself reflected, in terms that it recognizes, in the product of the understanding spirit.

I will be arguing in what follows that mind-body dualism is a universal human intuition, at least as old as *Homo sapiens*, which has much to do with why it is so difficult to get beyond it. When the "dualist West" is contrasted with other, presumably more holistic, cultures, what is really being picked out is the singular intensity with which mind-body dualism has been articulated, the assiduousness

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with which the boundary between the two has been policed,[2] and the rigidity with which these two different types of knowing about the world – humanistic *Verstehen* versus naturalistic *Erklären* – have been institutionalized in the modern Academy. In the university today, the two are required – at least by humanists – to keep strictly to their own tasks. In disciplines where the boundary between them is particularly problematic, such as anthropology, the field has simply split. Physical or biological anthropologists stick to explaining "bones and stones," while cultural anthropologists explore the more esoteric realm of human social understanding. In a growing number of universities, this division of labor has actually led to separate departments; in others, the two types of anthropology tend to coexist in uneasy separation.

The degree to which the mind versus body – and therefore the understanding versus explanation – split has become entrenched in the modern university is reflected by the fact that, in the humanities, "reductionistic" has come to function as an immediately recognizable term of dismissive abuse: a claim that the understanding *Geist* has crossed the line and inappropriately slipped from *Verstehen* to *Erklären*, treating its subject as an object. People *do* seem fundamentally different to us than objects, which is why this understanding versus explanation distinction is able to gain a foothold in our minds. However, the conviction that the human can never be *explained* – that human-level phenomena can never be reduced to lower-level causal forces – takes this intuition a step further. The result is that the field of human inquiry has proudly wrapped itself in an impenetrable shell of *Verstehen* and violently resists any attempt by the natural sciences to breach this boundary.

BEYOND DUALISM: TAKING THE BODY SERIOUSLY

I will argue in the pages that follow that such rigid dualism is a serious mistake. By enthusiastically embracing the confines of an ontologically divided world – and vigorously opposing and often demonizing anyone who dares to question this divide – it seems to me that humanists have doomed themselves to endlessly and onanistically spinning stories inside of stories. One angle from which to get a sense of how deeply entrenched – but ultimately indefensible – metaphysical dualism hinders the humanities is to consider a couple of pointed satires that I have had taped to my office door for years. The first is a cartoon by Jeff Reid (Figure 1).

Like any good satire this cartoon makes an important conceptual point by placing an absurd idea in a context where its absurdity becomes more salient. No one believes that eating a "Deconstruction Breakfast Food Product" would be enjoyable

[2] See Raymond Corbey (2005) for an excellent account of how metaphysical dualism has informed Western treatments of the fraught boundary between humans and animals, particularly with regard to our nearest relatives, the great apes.

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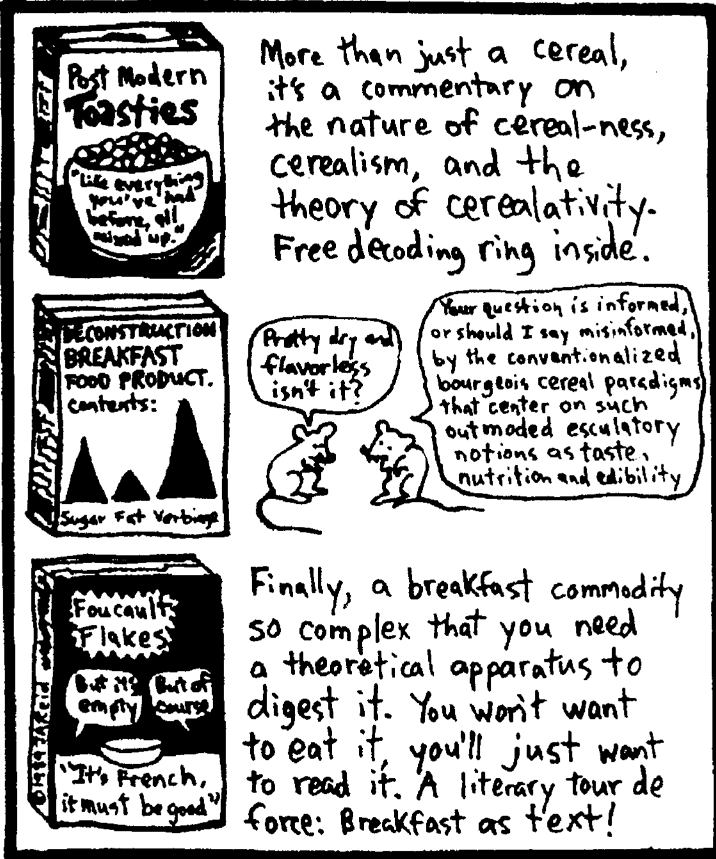

1. "Breakfast Theory." From *In These Times*, March 29, 1989 (www.inthesetimes.com), used with permission.

or that an empty bowl of "Foucault Flakes" would satisfy a person's hunger. This is because we never doubt that there is a common structure to human physiology that plays a role in determining things like our preference for corn flakes over, say, shredded cardboard. If, however, there is a common structure to human physiology, there is no reason to think the same is not true for the mind, which means that the extreme relativism of postmodernist theory renders it ultimately as intellectually vacuous as an empty bowl of cereal.

A very similar point – this time taking aim at what we might call the "individualistic constructivism" of French existentialism – is made by a hilarious satire called "The Jean-Paul Sartre Cookbook" that has for years been spreading

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through the Internet in various iterations, and that I cannot resist quoting at length:[3]

We have been lucky to discover several previously lost diaries of French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre stuck in between the cushions of our office sofa. These diaries reveal a young Sartre obsessed not with the void, but with food. Apparently Sartre, before discovering philosophy, had hoped to write "a cookbook that will put to rest all notions of flavor forever." The diaries are excerpted here for your perusal.

October 3
Spoke with Camus today about my cookbook. Though he has never actually eaten, he gave me much encouragement. I rushed home immediately to begin work. How excited I am! I have begun my formula for a Denver omelet . . .

October 6
I have realized that the traditional omelet form (eggs and cheese) is bourgeois. Today I tried making one out of cigarette, some coffee, and four tiny stones. I fed it to Malraux, who puked. I am encouraged, but my journey is still long.

October 10
I find myself trying ever more radical interpretations of traditional dishes, in an effort to somehow express the void I feel so acutely. Today I tried this recipe:

> **Tuna Casserole**
> Ingredients: 1 large casserole dish
> Place the casserole dish in a cold oven. Place a chair facing the oven and sit in it forever. Think about how hungry you are. When night falls, do not turn on the light.

While a void is expressed in this recipe, I am struck by its inapplicability to the bourgeois lifestyle. How can the eater recognize that the food denied him is a tuna casserole and not some other dish? I am becoming more and more frustrated . . .

November 15
Today I made a Black Forest cake out of five pounds of cherries and a live beaver, challenging the very definition of the word cake. I was very pleased. Malraux said he admired it greatly, but could not stay for dessert.

In a certain sense, of course, these satires are cheap shots: neither postmodernism nor existentialism would deny human physical commonalities. What both schools of thought *do* deny is human commonalities at the level of meaning – human bodies as inert physical objects may be subject to a common set of laws, but this has little to do with the lived world of human significance. It is this latter world that is culturally constructed (or, for the existentialists, created by the individual ex nihilo), and despite vague animal preferences for cereal over cardboard or cherries over stones, it is this constructed world of culturally or linguistically mediated experience that is all that we are really in touch with.

[3] By Marty Smith, originally published in a local Portland paper, *Free Agent*, in March 1987, reprinted in the *Utne Reader* Nov./Dec. 1993 (used with the permission of the author).

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Even if only a fraction of the evidence I will review in the pages that follow is reliable, this view is wildly incorrect. French existentialists in their dark Parisian cafés drank espresso with sugar rather than, say, dog urine, because of evolved and universally human preferences for stimulants and sugar, and these physical preferences are not different in kind from our preferences for light over darkness, strength over weakness, or truth over falsity. The humor-producing tension of the Sartre satire, for instance, arises from the conflict between the existentialist assertion of a universe without meaning and the obvious truths of everyday human life: certain things taste good, certain things look good, certain actions make sense, and this ineluctable horizon of significance cannot be erased by a sea of black coffee or a mountain of Galoises. As Charles Taylor has observed in his critique of what he calls the "ethics of authenticity":

> It may be important that my life be chosen . . . but unless some options are more significant than others, the very idea of self-choice falls into triviality and hence incoherence. Self-choice as an ideal makes sense only because some *issues* are more significant than others. I couldn't claim to be a self-chooser, and deploy a whole Nietzschean vocabulary of self-making, just because I choose steak and fries over poutine for lunch. Which issues are significant, *I* do not determine. If I did, no issue would be significant. . . . To shut out demands emanating from beyond the self is precisely to suppress the conditions of significance, and hence to court trivialization. (1992: 39–40)[4]

Kurt Vonnegut Jr. makes a similar point in observing that "characters paralyzed by the meaninglessness of modern life still have to drink water from time to time" (1982: 110), as does Terry Eagleton in noting that certain shared and universal human norms, such as the fact that that "people do not throw themselves with a hoarse cry on total strangers and amputate their legs" (2003: 15), are part of an inescapable background of human intelligibility.

This is not to deny the power and poetry of the existentialist position – one would have to be dead not to be moved by the quietly courageous and resolutely lucid stance of Camus' *homme absurde* as portrayed in The *Myth of Sisyphus* or *The Plague* (1942, 1947). But Camus' gift as a writer and rhetorician is what in fact invalidates his basic philosophical point, because – despite his claim that he rejects any "scale of values" (1947: 86) – the very power of his ideal is derived from predetermined and universal human values: being awake is better than being asleep; being clear is better than being muddled; being strong and courageous is better than being weak and cowardly. Camus' creativity consists in recruiting these universal normative reactions and mapping them in a quite novel manner: lucidity consists in knowing nothing for certain, and courage consists in rejecting those transcendent truths that once were perceived as requiring strength to defend

[4] Taylor tends to view these "demands emanating from beyond the self" as primarily historical and social rather than naturalistic, but the basic critique of individual constructivism is the same.

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against unbelief. The mappings are new, but the sources are probably as old as *Homo erectus*.[5] Similarly, despite postmodernist posturing, the motivations and goings-on at any given annual Modern Language Association meeting would, with a little bit of background explanation, be perfectly comprehensible to Pleistocene hunter-gatherers: friendship, intellectual curiosity, coalition recruitment, exchange of adaptive information (including a heavy dose of social gossip), and an overall direct or indirect goal of achieving security, prestige, power, and sexual access.[6]

Unless one is willing to take refuge in strong Platonism or Cartesianism and embrace the existence of an autonomous "Ghost in the Machine," the mind *is* the body, and the body *is* the mind. Despite Camus' anguished claims, then, there is no absurd gap between our need for transparent certainty and a dense world devoid of meaning. The world *is* reasonable – not in the sort of transcendent, absolute sense that Camus rightly dismisses as wishful consolation, but in an eminently embodied, anthropocentric sense. The process of evolution ensures that there is a tight fit between our values and desires and the structure of the world in which we have developed. No appeal to eternal verities is required to assure us that a cigarette and stone omelet would make even Malraux puke, or that an empty bowl of Foucault Flakes would leave us unsatisfied. Of course, as I will argue in Chapter 4, human beings are apparently unique among animals in possessing the cognitive fluidity and cultural technology to effect some substantial changes in what gives us pleasure, what we find worth pursuing, and what we deem as meaningful. But all of this cognitive and cultural innovation is grounded in – and remains ultimately constrained by – the structure of our body-minds.

The fact that these body-minds are, have always been, and will always continue to be part of the world of things also effectively short-circuits the epistemological skepticism that permeates postmodernist thinking. A nondualistic approach to the person promises no privileged access to eternal, objective truths, but is based upon the belief that commonalities of human embodiment in the world can result in a stable body of shared knowledge, verified (at least provisionally) by proofs based on common perceptual access. By breaching the mind-body divide – by bringing the human mind back into contact with a rich and meaningful world of things – this approach to the humanities starts from an embodied mind that is always in touch with the world, as well as a pragmatic model of truth or verification that takes the body and the physical world seriously.

[5] Camus himself seems to be pointing in this direction with his observation that "nous prenons l'habitude de vivre avant d'acquérir celle de penser" (We take on the habit of living before acquiring that of thinking) (1942: 23).

[6] A point made with grace, sympathy, and humor by the novelist David Lodge in works such as the trilogy *Changing Places*, *Small World*, and *Nice Work* (Lodge 1975, 1984, 1988). One of Lodge's more recent works, *Thinks . . .* (2001) takes on issues involving cognitive science, the humanities, and the fear of reductionism, with the usual doses of insight concerning human nature and sexuality thrown in for good measure.

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VERTICAL INTEGRATION

In place of what has turned into a jealously guarded division of labor between the humanities and the natural sciences, then, this book will argue for an integrated, "embodied" approach to the study of human culture. While the humanities do concern themselves with human-level structures of meaning characterized by emergent structures irreducible (at least in practice) to the lower-level structures of meaning studied by the natural sciences, they are not completely sui generis. If we are to take the humanities beyond dualistic metaphysics, these human-level structures of meaning need to be seen as grounded in the lower levels of meaning studied by the natural sciences, rather than hovering magically above them. Understood in this way, human-level reality can be seen as eminently *explainable*. Practically speaking, this means that humanists need to start taking seriously discoveries about human cognition being provided by neuroscientists and psychologists, which have a constraining function to play in the formulation of humanistic theories – calling into question, for instance, such deeply entrenched dogmas as the "blank slate" theory of human nature, strong versions of social constructivism and linguistic determinism, and the ideal of disembodied reason. Bringing the humanities and the natural sciences together into a single, integrated chain seems to me the only way to clear up the current miasma of endlessly contingent discourses and representations of representations that currently hampers humanistic inquiry. By the same token, as natural scientists begin poking their noses into areas traditionally studied by the humanities – the nature of ethics, literature, consciousness, emotions, or aesthetics – they are sorely in need of humanistic expertise if they are to effectively decide what sorts of questions to ask, how to frame these questions, and what sorts of stories to tell in interpreting their data.

Of course, calls for breaking down the barriers between the humanities and natural sciences are at least as old as the division itself. In the exciting early days of the scientific revolution, David Hume foresaw the imminent integration of moral philosophy and empirically grounded physiology and psychology:

> Men are now cured of their passion for hypotheses and systems in natural philosophy, and will hearken to no arguments but those which are derived from experience. It is full time that they should attempt a like reformation in all moral disquisitions; and reject every system of ethics, however subtle or ingenious, which is not founded on fact and observation. (1777/1976: 174–175)

Hume's prediction was a bit premature. Arguably one of the primary barriers to the sort of integration Hume desired is the fact that human beings seem to be born dualists (Bloom 2004), with a deeply ingrained and universal tendency to see the world as divided into conscious agents exercising free will and dumb, inert objects. Breaking down the humanities–natural science divide thus requires overcoming, or at least bracketing, some very powerful folk intuitions.

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As a study of historical paradigm shifts, such as the triumph of Copernicus over Ptolemy, demonstrates, displacing folk intuitions is possible but only with great difficulty, on the strength of overwhelming empirical evidence, and perhaps only partially – I, for one, continue to spend most of my life experiencing a Ptolemaic solar system. What has happened in the last few decades to make Hume's call for integration more feasible is the explosive development of cognitive science. A blanket term for a set of disciplines – artificial intelligence (AI), philosophy of consciousness, and various branches of neuroscience, psychology, and linguistics – concerned with the empirical investigation of the human mind, cognitive science has created an intellectual environment where bracketing our human predisposition toward dualism may finally be a *real*, rather than merely notional, possibility for us.[7] In Hume's time, and indeed up to the last few decades, the cognitive sciences have been in such a primitive state that taking a thoroughly physicalist stance toward the person was no more than a notional possibility, perceived dimly by authors such as Dostoevsky and pioneering empiricists such as William James but patently absurd to most sober thinkers. As Daniel Dennett notes, until the creation of computers and artificial intelligence systems in the 1950s, the idea that dumb matter by itself could ever give rise to consciousness was deemed inconceivable by most philosophers (1995: 26–33), and for good reason: conscious beings have powers that seem so genuinely unique that they *must* have their origin in some ontologically distinct substance. The "intuition pump" needed to get beyond this apparently self-evident fact did not come along until the advent of AI systems such as the IBM supercomputer Deep Blue or the virtual interlocutor named Eliza, which provided fairly concrete evidence that a purely physical, algorithmic system of "myopic, semi-intelligent demons" can produce something that looks and acts very much like consciousness (1995: esp. 200–212, 428–437).

One possible response to the AI revolution is to draw back into what Owen Flanagan refers to as the "mysterian" position: artificial intelligence can produce the *illusion* of consciousness, but we know it can't be real consciousness, because, well, we just *know* it.[8] Other humanists have decided to bite the ontological bullet and explore the consequences of taking seriously what cognitive science seems to be suggesting: consciousness is not a mysterious substance distinct from matter, but rather an emergent property of matter put together in a sufficiently complicated way. The manner in which we engage in the study of consciousness and its products – that is, the traditional domain of the humanities – should therefore be

[7] Borrowing terminology from Bernard Williams. As Williams explains, a real possibility for me is one that I could actually embrace without losing my basic sense of reality, while a notional possibility – such as my deciding to lead the lifestyle of a medieval samurai – can be imagined only in the abstract; see Williams 1985: Ch. 9.

[8] See Flanagan's distinction between the "old mysterians" (unabashed dualists) and "new mysterians" – professed naturalists who nonetheless place consciousness outside of the realm of naturalistic explanation (1992: esp. 8–11).

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