

On The Importance of the Humanities

Most of us would not dispute the importance of our memories to all aspects of our life, both conscious and unconscious. As the neurologist, Antonio Damasio, has pointed out, our sense of self is built from our brain's ability to store and retrieve memories. Without memories our brains could only react reflexively and could not learn from failures or construct alternate possible responses and futures.

Most of who we perceive ourselves to be, our personal identity, is based on the memories we have stored from past events in our life. Some of the most emotionally disturbing diseases are those like Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia that destroy a person's memories and consequently their personal identity and ability to function in society and the world.

Human societies are built from and would not exist without biological organisms. From a biological perspective they are an additional level of organization. As such we might expect societies to exhibit similar approaches to problem solving and survival as those employed by populations, organisms, cells, and even chemical levels (DNA). The ability to store memories of earlier encounters, reactions, and outcomes for both real-time comparison to current encounters and preparation for future encounters has been a successful strategy at lower levels of organization, so we should expect to find the same strategies at the societal level.

The roots of today's humanities as a set of academic disciplines can be found in all human societies and cultures. The societal memories are stored as common stories that are shared both among the current occupants of the society as well as with future members. These stories capture the memories of the society in terms of the behaviors (reactions) that have worked and those that have failed. They provide an autobiographical history (summary) for the society, a sort of ego-centered self-awareness that is shared and passed on to future members of the society. They also provide possible futures open to that society. Over time technologies have improved our ability to collect, store, process, and disseminate these memories and their applications, but the important function of providing salient societal memories has remained the same.

As with advanced brains, modern societies have modularized and specialized activities to better use and control these memories. For example, the discipline of History has a similar role to the hippocampus, sorting through the vast array of details and preserving (potentiating) those that seem to have the most significance either because of their relation to the structure of memories already stored or because they involve a particularly dangerous threat or significant opportunity.

Literature and art provide a society with something like an autobiographical self. The social cannon created provides a summary (often idealized) that reflects the society's history, mores, and possible futures. Some works (classics) remain relatively stable, but the autobiographical self continues to be updated based on new societal encounters and challenges.

The Social Sciences (including Political Science) apply the historical and autobiographical context to the current input and project possible futures. Politics itself is more like the primitive limbic system, which reacts immediately to current input based on reflexive mechanisms. Without appropriate training, these reflexes, like emotional responses, often remain independent of any self-control imposed by the more reflective disciplines and render the society less effective at profiting from the memories.

From this societal perspective we can step back and ask what would happen if we stopped teaching, funding, and paying attention to these societal equivalents of memory and higher thought? In other words, what would societal Alzheimer's disease look like?

What would happen if one part of the society stopped paying attention to current sensory input (data) and based their actions primarily on internalized memories (ideology) instead? In other words, what would societal schizophrenia or a related delusional behavior look like?

What would happen if one part of society became more and more driven to satisfy their comfort (pleasure) levels to the point they ignored the damage it was doing to the entire societal organism of which they are a part? In other words, what would a societal addiction look like?

We don't need much of an imagination to see what all of these mental disorders would look like when applied to the societal level of organization. We can all see the ravages of loss of memory on an individual. We also can all see the ravages of loss of memory on a society, even though we might not recognize the cause as such. The question is, can a society that has already discounted its humanities memory structures as no longer important cure itself, or is its societal cognitive functioning already beyond repair?

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