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The Utility of the Useless in Times of Social and Life Crises

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Abstract

This article aims to reflect on how humanistic education can empower individuals and professionals to navigate social and personal crises, with a focus on the challenges facing Chile, our domain. It also seeks to provide recommendations for harnessing the humanities in education to help future generations avoid the alarming consequences of functional illiteracy, as highlighted by OECD studies. In Chile, these studies reveal that a staggering 53% of adults and 84% of the population struggle to comprehend written texts, leading to a disconnect from their social, cultural, and historical context. This has perpetuated a cycle of exploitation, frustration, and anger within society for decades. While this perspective may be limited, drawing from specific authors and academic courses, it underscores the need to address these crises through education. By integrating the humanities into primary, secondary, and later, higher education, we can begin to mitigate these challenges and foster a more informed, empathetic, and engaged citizenry. The title incorporates an "appropriation" of the book *The Utility of the Useless* by Professor Nuccio Ordine (2018), which was deemed pertinent for this project, and from which certain ideas and quotations have also been derived.

Keywords: humanities, education, crisis, engineering, critical thinking

Introduction

Many of the decisions that have been taken up to the present have been based on an economic model or in the name of the development of a country or the productivity of a country, all of these decisions have left out the human factor, which has led us to have a polluted and overheated planet today. The contemporary globalised educational context is characterised by a growing emphasis on the development of pragmatic and utilitarian professional training. The contemporary social order

perpetuates a calculative rationality devoid of the practice of meditation. As a result, the criteria of functionality currently assume greater significance (Ordine, 2018), leading to the erroneous assumption that perfection is attainable through utility. In this context, educational institutions are shaped by a societal model that espouses the ideals of technological advancement and advanced capitalism. Consequently, educational practices are aligned with the promotion of competencies for the development of human capital, which is solely oriented towards the world of work (Massé, 2021). For its part, university education is constructed by valuing some disciplines over others considered expendable. "One no longer studies to arrive at a way of thinking and reflecting, one does it to obtain a diploma" (Massé, 2021, p. 428). In this way, the humanities have been reduced or eliminated from training instances (Ordine, 2018). However, the society of the 21st century is obliged to inquire into knowledge that does not provide an immediate result aimed at resolving emerging situations.

In the current context, the phenomenon of learning highlights the importance of establishing a foundation of knowledge that can inform and guide our actions in a way that is both democratic and just. It would therefore seem prudent for the educational processes in universities to reflect the development of human capacities that lead to thinking and acting in a deliberative process that considers consequences affecting the quality of life and social coexistence. One possible way forward might be to consider reintegrating the humanities into educational institutions. "The study of literature, philosophy and history will be an inspiration for young people to lead a fulfilled life, a life that includes creative and innovative contributions to society" (Ordine, 2018, p. 23). This could provide an opportunity for university education to train citizens capable of solving social problems that are no longer based on productivism, competitiveness and utilitarianism (Massé, 2021).

The Crises

It can be argued that social crises have been a constant feature of human history. Some of these crises have occurred recently in our country, as evidenced by the social issue of the saltpeter mines at the beginning of the last century. This crisis resulted in significant human suffering, including deaths, due to the exploitation and abuse of workers. In his speech, "Rich and Poor through a Century of Republican Life," delivered in Rengo on September 3, 1910, Luis Emilio Recabarren diagnoses the situation of Chilean workers as they celebrate the centenary of the republic. He asserts that, a century after the republic's establishment, workers have nothing to celebrate. Recabarren emphasizes the importance of workers acquiring literacy skills:

"To encourage instruction, in all its degrees and in all its forms is the duty of every person who considers himself civilized. To encourage instruction, as has been said, is to weaken the bases of unpredictability and vice; it is to begin their disappearance.... Let us stimulate him to read, to think, to analyze. To do this (...) is to lead the people

to improve their living conditions. The more educated people will be the more powerful people” (Recabarren, 2010, p. 55).

President Pedro Aguirre Cerda will assume responsibility for highlighting the importance of universal access to education, with his campaign slogan "To govern is to educate." This initiative marks a significant step forward in the field of education, as it will be the first time that textbooks will be distributed to all students enrolled in public schools. The coup d'état led by Carlos Ibáñez del Campo resulted in his assumption of power and the subsequent establishment of the Carabineros de Chile, a controversial police force, later implicated in human rights violations. In the wake of the October 2019 social upheaval, the "apollonian state" (Nietzsche) was maintained through the promotion of its defining slogan, "Order and Homeland." The significant demonstration of coal workers from the city of Lota to Concepción in 1960, advocating for enhanced working conditions and remuneration for their families, represents a pivotal moment in Chilean history. The 1973 coup d'état marked a distinct turning point, delineating a clear division between opposing factions in the country's contemporary political landscape.

The Apollonian and the Dionysian

Since the inception of the republic, there has been an endeavour to actualise an Apollonian concept, exemplified by the tenets of peace and order. This has been employed as a rationale for the perpetuation or preservation of a socio-economic system that was imposed during a period of political exception, as postulated by Naomi Klein (2010) in her book *The Shock Doctrine*. In Greek mythology, Apollo is the god of music, poetry, and sunlit beauty. He represents the pinnacle of human wisdom and perfection. The most common manifestations of irrationality are carnivals and artistic expressions, dithyrambs and bacchanalia. The protests held in the streets during the months of October and November 2019 can be seen as an example of the Dionysian, representing what is outside the idea of peace and order. These protests can be considered a catharsis carried out by groups of people who are attempting to escape the system's idea of the Apollonian. As Nietzsche expresses in *The Twilight of the Idols* "their will to live", it is this will to live that has led the population to demonstrate to generate changes, to challenge the Apollonian that is the "rationality" that dangerously undermines life. The social outburst may be seen as an expression of the individual's autonomy and self-care, in terms of both present and future social damage, it is imperative to prioritise the advancement of those who are concerned about their future (destiny) and escapes from Heidegger's "hidden anguish". Just as in Greek culture, both gods (Apollo and Dionysus) reached a balance, one by the perfection of beauty through Phidias, the other by showing the horrors and enigmas of the world, Chilean society seeks to reach a more equitable and socially conscious society by trying to change the system that prevails in the country.

The Excessive Use of Reason

The thought that only productivity and competitiveness are important for the economic growth of a country has led to bad practices that have been detrimental to both the public education system and the working conditions of people, as well as other sectors that will not be analyzed here.

Why the humanities are useful today more than ever, regarding technique today and in Heidegger, it is because the latter is the representation of society. This society that bases its development on technique, this same technique that is part of consumption to sustain the economy. The conjunction of technique and economy lead to solidify a way to distract attention from what is really important, which is to be aware of reality and the immediate social environment of people. The humanities help to understand the above to form a solid pillar of critical thinking.

According to Martha Nussbaum, quoted by Adriana Valdés (2017), “treating people as manipulable objects if you have never learned another way of looking at them” (p.14) is the basis of the inequity of a society like ours.

Society in democracy is difficult to be thought of if citizens are not “able to think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the meaning of other people’s sufferings and achievements”. Thus also “...generations of utilitarian machines will begin to be produced, instead of integral citizens” (Valdés, 2017, p. 14). One might consider the educational reforms of secondary education, which sought to eliminate the study of philosophy, history, and the arts in some parts of the country. This approach is consistent with the concept of human usefulness as postulated by Heidegger (Acevedo, 2016). The “utensil”, the human being in this case, remained “unthemed” by deception, or fear thus remaining at the hand of the system for decades, both at the beginning of the republic, as well as throughout the twentieth century. In the same way, the person is “provoked” and transformed into a resource even if he is not, but becomes quantifiable. Without going any further, companies still maintain their Human Resources departments today. Some of them have recently started to call their employees collaborators, thus forming a respective totality.

For these reasons is that humanistic knowledge is for life and not instrumental, temporary, as are some skills that have been learned and then discarded because of their obsolescence over time, an example of the above is the learning of computer languages that a user must have to operate a computer.

before the appearance of the Windows operating system. Knowledge, humanistic for our interest, is the only form of “wealth” that is not diminished or lost when it is given and, on the opposite, enriches the recipient for life.

Influence of Television and Advertising

Television, which was originally presented with the mission to inform, entertain and educate, has become a purely entertaining medium. In addition, today it focuses on

looting and violence, losing the sense of what is happening in the background, which are the social demands. Television itself creates public opinion when people see the authority of the image, according to Sartori (2012), "The essential thing is that the eye believes in what it sees What is seen seems real, which implies that it seems true" (p. 76). But, on the other hand, it causes the ability to think to atrophy by having everything visually. As Sartori says:

"And this is the process that atrophies when homo sapiens is supplanted by homo videns. In the latter, conceptual (abstract) language is replaced by perceptual (concrete) language which is infinitely poorer: poorer not only in terms of words (to the number of words), but above all in terms of the richness of meaning, that is, of connotative capacity" (Sartori, 2012, p.52)

Advertising and television have been fundamental tools in this course of developing distracted thinking as shown by Mario Vargas Llosa (2012) in his book *The Civilization of the Spectacle*, he points out:

"...in the ludic banalization of the prevailing culture, in which the supreme value is now to amuse or amuse oneself, above all other forms of knowledge or ideals. People (...) turn on the television or buy a book to have a good time, in the lightest sense of the word, not to rack their brains with worries, problems, doubts" (p. 136).

It can be reasonably asserted that the aforementioned observations are applicable to the extant social networks. Conversely, as Terry Eagleton (2017) posits, universities have been failing to cultivate individuals capable of critical and cultivated thinking as they have increasingly become institutions akin to companies, driven by the pursuit of profit and the delivery of "products" that facilitate technical advancement. This has the effect of relegating the study of the humanities to a mere filling of academic grids with so-called "soft" skills that students do not value in the immediate future, and which they also tend to devalue in the longer term, since they do not see these skills as having any value for their professional development. Nuccio Ordine (2018) asserts that the notion of humanistic knowledge, or that which does not produce an immediate economic benefit, is misguided. These forms of knowledge are not merely a means to an end; rather, they are an end in themselves, as they "can exercise a fundamental role in the cultivation of the spirit and in the civil and cultural development of humanity" (p. 9). In this way, what is often perceived as "useless" becomes useful, as it helps people to become better. The fact that people are always experiencing crises is a fundamental reason for studying the humanities. An example of this is, in general, engineers who throughout their lives make decisions based on the quantitative; however, when all the goals are already fulfilled such as family, house, car and the middle of life is approaching, some begin to wonder what sense all this has had, feeling enslaved to work and the responsibilities of life. This is when the mid-life crisis appears. The humanities are the path that leads to answers and resolves such questions.

By identifying the qualitative aspects of the texts that cannot be quantified. The literary canon provides examples that transcend temporal boundaries, including Hamlet's existential dilemma regarding the choice between vengeance against his mother and uncle for the death of his father, the King of Denmark, and Faust's decision to sell his soul to the devil in exchange for success that ultimately eluded him. It is beneficial to engage with these texts to recognise that literature encompasses a body of knowledge that is not immediately monetisable, yet facilitates the comprehension of pivotal matters during periods of adversity. In an interview, Howard Gardner (2016) posits that:

"...and it is one of the reasons for the great crises of maturity, when you realize that there are no (...) humanistic studies: Philosophy, Literature, History of Thought(...). You can live without philosophy, but worse. In an experiment with MIT engineers, we discovered that those who had not studied humanities, when they reached 40 and 50, were more prone to suffer crises and depression (...). Because engineering and technological studies end up giving you a sense of control over your life that is basically unreal: you only concentrate on what has a solution and on the questions with answers. And for years you find them. But when, with maturity, you discover that in reality it is impossible to control everything, you become disoriented... for lack of humanistic studies."

In light of the aforementioned, it can be posited that in globalised societies, where the rapid exchange of information and extensive utilisation of technologies are hallmarks, the advancement of educational systems that facilitate the comprehensive formation of students is of paramount importance.

Training in the humanities enables the promotion of specific reflection in individuals, resulting in an internal transformation. This facilitates a personal reflection on generational comparisons between the present generation and their parents or grandparents. Additionally, it allows for reflection on societal evolution and its implications for the workplace, thereby contributing to societal improvement. This reflection provides an opportunity for individuals to engage in shared discourse and recognise common ideas. Maza-Ortega (2019) posits that students comprehend the role of technology in enhancing quality of life. However, they also gain insight into the humanities, which elucidate the rationale behind the development of specific technologies. This facilitates their comprehension of life and their profession, and enables them to ascertain their place in society. In order to attain these objectives, it is essential that engineering students possess a comprehensive humanistic education, which enables them to recognise their social and professional obligations and that "The subject confronts them with real life events, from the past and/or present, which are very important at the moment of understanding the world and its current situation." The same study points out, in other subcategories, that:

"...it develops a motivation in students to encourage interest in reading, allowing them to compare previous historical problems, fostering the development of critical

thinking. Knowing the social environment allows students to have a visualization of diverse realities that foster the relationship between subjects, allowing an understanding of realities not perceived before. Both subcategories lead to the formation of a professional with humanistic training.”

Change of Vision

What would be the outcome if educators specialising in subjects such as biology, chemistry, physics, mathematics and English were to adopt a pedagogical approach that involved fostering a questioning mindset in their students? It would be intriguing for educators to concentrate their curricula on inquiries that, in conjunction with their respective specialties, would prompt their students to contemplate their surroundings from that particular perspective. Ultimately, this approach would not only foster the development of a subject-specific expert but also an individual with a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter and the ability to apply that knowledge in real-world situations. As posited by Cortina (2013):

“As opposed to naturalistic knowledge, the humanities do not lead to direct and clearly useful consequences, but provide strict, but not exact, knowledge; they work on facts, but try to articulate them from meaning, which is the intelligible matter in the human world” (p. 214).

The contemporary era is witnessing a proliferation of educational opportunities, both formal and informal, accessible through public and private institutions and online platforms. It was unthinkable that a person from a working family could easily access higher education only sixty years ago. The reasons were varied, among them, the non-completion of basic or secondary education. The advent of secondary education as a compulsory phase of education occurred at the beginning of this century. This development opened the door for all young people to consider pursuing higher education and becoming university professionals, with the expectation that other factors such as economics would not impede this path. However, a humanistic approach to either of these two forms of education could result in a society with a developed critical thinking and a more cultured population.

It is not permissible to deny individuals access to knowledge that encourages reflection, such as artistic, historical, and philosophical insights. When nations fail to provide such knowledge, they lose their sense of direction regarding the fundamental principles that should guide their development. Therefore, the education system must equip young individuals with the capacity for critical thinking and encourage them to engage with knowledge that transcends the boundaries of specialized disciplines. These disciplines, in and of themselves, are insufficient for meeting the ethical imperative of nurturing well-rounded, ethical citizens. (Valdés, 2017). Democratic societies must appreciate humanistic education as the great opportunity for their citizens to acquire comprehensive thinking about human life and its meaning, its achievements and sufferings (Valdés, 2017). An engineer who bases his decisions

solely on mathematical or mercantilist logic will undoubtedly have adverse effects on the advancement of individuals or society as a whole, given that his decisions will have direct implications for the lives of all members of society. According to Cortina (2013), The argument put forth is that the humanities of the 21st century have the responsibility of contributing to the reflection and understanding of human intersubjectivity, which are the capacities that make it possible to link the different personal identities that need to be recognised in order to realise life together. Therefore, university education is not merely the transmission of technical knowledge; rather, it is an institutional instance where its members cooperate for the achievement of virtues and the search for personal and professional excellence.

Conclusions

The field of humanities education plays a pivotal role in counteracting the adverse effects of the excessive use of social networks. The use of abbreviations, icons, and memes in these networks has led to a noticeable decline in spelling standards. Additionally, the frequent use of swear words and other informal vocabulary has contributed to a reduction in the lexicon available to individuals, particularly in formal contexts. This is a cause for concern, particularly given the observed decline in reading comprehension, which has accelerated in recent years alongside the advent of diverse social networks over the past decade.

Education in the humanities facilitates the process of "learning to learn," or the acquisition of advanced knowledge. In this regard, the humanities serve as a crucial instrument for comprehending the underlying causes of crises and formulating responses to these social phenomena with a more robust foundation than would otherwise be possible without such humanistic training. In his 2015 work on the subject of education for civic life, Fernando Savater states that "this conception of education has especially to do with philosophy, both for its reflection on social practice and the values that guide it and for its preparation for argued communication" (p.90). Education in the humanities keeps people from being turned into a "utensil" for the prevailing political-economic system in any society.

It is an ethical obligation for countries and education policies to ensure that all students, particularly those pursuing engineering degrees, receive a humanistic education. This will ensure that their future decisions are informed by a fundamental humanistic principle.

In a world where technology and profitability appear to be the driving forces behind societal development, the teaching of humanities offers two key benefits: Firstly, the development of soft skills is achieved through a participatory and student-centred approach. Secondly, critical thinking is cultivated in a qualitative and creative manner. Technologies require the humanistic to facilitate their comprehension and utilisation. In summary, the humanities facilitate the development of skills that contribute to the future professional. Furthermore, the teaching of the humanities at the university

level enables students to contextualise the various factors that influence decision-making in their personal and professional lives.

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