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A New Humanism?

Voyages: The *centrality of the human being underpinning modernity is being challenged by biology on one hand and technology on the other. Is the formulation of a new humanism necessary, and if the answer is affirmative, what would it have to consider mostly?*

Perri Klass: This is one of the reasons that I am so interested in the possibility of building medical humanities as a subject for study here at NYU Florence. Medicine has become both more science-based and more high-tech, and clearly we want to take full advantage of everything that science and technology can offer in the service of healing. However, both physicians and patients have also become profoundly aware of the connections between mind and body, and also of the ways that we must use scientific understanding as fully as possible, but never reduce human beings to physiological algorithms, or to their genetics (however sophisticated the understanding of the genetic

code becomes). And at the same time, many scientists and physicians find themselves looking to the humanities and to humanism for help in understanding the larger meaning of the jobs they do. The challenge, surely, is to find a humanism which embraces and celebrates everything that we learn from biology, which in some sense includes much of what we learn about ourselves as humans, including how we use technology and how it affects our biology.

Larry Wolff: As an historian, I would point out that humanism was very profoundly shaped by the world of Renaissance Florence, and that if we look back at the world of the quattrocento we can see that humanism, even in its most important epoch, was never unchallenged but was always embattled and entangled with other cultural perspectives. I think that technology and biology offer new challenges but do not fundamentally undermine a perspective that affirms human beings' capacity to shape their own lives (albeit within certain limits) and believe in their own value and significance (which change in content across the centuries).

A Global Ethic

Voyages*: Many of today's problems are global and require global solutions. Attaining common goals requires shared rules. Is a global ethic possible? If so, what would be its unifying principles and values?*

Perri Klass: I don't know how to think about the idea of "a global ethic," but I do believe that people of good will can often find common ground, and as a pediatrician I would always suggest starting with the question of how we can best care for our children – and that can be extended to the question of how to care for all those who are most vulnerable and whose safety requires careful thought and attention in any society. I think that all societies do recognize in some form the obligation to protect those at the extremes of life, and of course, that continuity across the lifespan is also a connection to the future.

Larry Wolff: I would add that all cultures and societies have some commitment to preserving their own histories that help to define the meaning of those cultures and societies, and in this common commitment to telling our stories we can look for the ways in which those histories intersect and provide us with some common global ground for understanding one another.

Technology and the decline of moral standards

Voyages*: This topic has come up in various publications. Some think the present moral crisis has simply been made visible by technology, others are convinced technology has contributed to it. What is your opinion?*

Perri Klass: I am honestly not sure exactly what is meant by "the present moral crisis," but as a journalist, I do believe in the power of technology to make injustice visible and to help people appreciate the implications of their actions, and the ways that they are connected. However, as with other aspects of technology, I do not believe that the tool – technology – has a moral valence, and technology can (for example) spread misinformation and antivaccine propaganda, even as it can spread important information about health and science. It's all about how the technology is used, and who is controlling it, and toward what ends.

Larry Wolff: I would add to Perri's comment that for historians a moral crisis (as opposed to an economic crisis) is very often the product of particular cultural circumstances, even defined by those cultural circumstances, and the evolution of new cultural priorities and new values, with the passing of time, will redefine the crisis over the course of time.

Scientific illiteracy

Voyages*: How can scientific illiteracy be accounted for in that range of population that has access to scientific knowledge via education and internet?*

Perri Klass: As I said above, those who have access to information nowadays also have access to misinformation and disinformation. I worry about the ways that students decide that science is inaccessible, or that they are just not "good at science," and I worry not only about scientific illiteracy but about statistical illiteracy. We have seen so clearly during the pandemic that it is essential for the general public to feel comfortable understanding not only scientific information but also scientific process—the importance (and the meaning) of peer review, of pilot studies, of double-blinded trials, of statistical power. And I worry that when people have decided that science is somehow beyond them, they may turn to non-evidence-based narratives.

Larry Wolff: Scientific illiteracy is as old as science itself; there have always been those who have questioned science, as science boldly sets out to redefine the world for new generations. At the present moment science is so immensely complex and technical that no layperson could master its contents in full (or indeed no scientist from outside her own field of specialization) and there is all the more opportunity for people to doubt the validity of scientific formulations that are immensely difficult for anyone but the scientists themselves to understand.

Challenges for Education

Voyages*: What are the main challenges for education in a world confronted with survival threats and sharpening divisions?*

Perri Klass: As you might expect from the answer above, I think it's essential to include as many students as possible in science, in statistics, and in the forms of scientific debate. I think that by giving students the vocabulary and the confidence to participate in important discussions, educators should also be sending the message that students can and should be part of taking on these problems, and that academic discourse can play an important role.

Larry Wolff: And as you might expect, I'm going to push for encouraging societies to confront their own histories honestly, to understand where they are coming from in order to know better where they might be heading. And I'm also going to put in a plug for global and international education as a way of encouraging people from different cultures to understand and respect one another within our common global framework.

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Times. Her books include *A Not Entirely Benign Procedure: Four Years as a Medical Student*, and *Baby Doctor: A Pediatrician's Training, Treatment Kind and Fair: Letters to a Young Doctor*, and other works of fiction and non-fiction. Her medical journalism has appeared in *The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, The New Yorker, The New England Journal of Medicine,* and *Harvard Medicine.* Dr. Klass is the National Medical Director of Reach Out and Read, a national program which promotes early literacy through pediatric clinics, with advice about reading aloud and children's books provided at routine well-child visits.

Larry Wolff is the Julius Silver Professor of History at New York University, executive director of the NYU Remarque Institute, and co-director of NYU Florence at Villa La Pietra. His most recent book is *Woodrow Wilson and the Reimagining of Eastern Europe* (2020). He is also the author of *The Singing Turk: Ottoman Power and Operatic Emotions on the European Stage from the Siege of Vienna to the Age of Napoleon* (2016), *Paolina's Innocence: Child Abuse in Casanova's Venice* (2012), *The Idea of Galicia: History and Fantasy in Habsburg Political Culture* (2010), *Venice and the Slavs: The Discovery of Dalmatia in the Age of Enlightenment* (2001), *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (1994), *The Vatican and Poland in the Age of the Partitions* (1988), and *Postcards from the End of the World: Child Abuse in Freud's Vienna* (1988). He also writes frequently about opera, and is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.