ERASMUS

Edition 6

think deeper.

JUNE 2024 - DEGREES OF LOVE

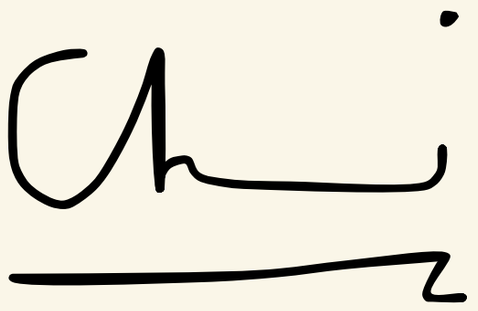
Dear voyager...

Welcome to this little space where ideas abode and abound.

Welcome to a reading experience devoid of topic, time and word constraints - just as our writers are devoid of topic, time and word constraints.

Welcome to *Erasmus*.

I hope you enjoy your stay with us,
and I hope the ideas in these essays will stay with you.



Chenrui Zhang

Dear Erasmians

I study politics and war so that my sons can study math and philosophy. And my sons study math and philosophy so that their sons can have the freedom to study art, poetry, and music.

John Adams wrote something like this in a letter once. I drink these words like soju, letting them wear away the guilt I carry as a hyphenated immigrant-American who chose to study Philosophy instead of Economics in university. The guilt is familiar, pushing us Hyphens into the paths of Data Science, Accounting, and Medicine. Because no one wants a degree that seems to slip through our fingers like sand, and a future as predictable as clouds.

I can only explain my choice by telling the story of Icarus, as retold by 木心。木心 is a pen name that literally translates to “heart of wood.” But to describe 木心 as a writer is to call da Vinci just a painter. More on him later.

Society is a Labyrinth—monsters of our own making slink within. To be born in the Labyrinth is to be mortal. To want to escape the Labyrinth is to be humaiun. But most settle for building sanctuaries within the maze's corners and crevices, guarding their little gardens of self against the wall that threaten to close in. Some of us become architects, like Daedalaus, dedicating our life forces towards molding the Labyrinth, so that we leave it a little better than it was before we came. But the only way out of the Labyrinth is to fly. And we've all been warned of the dangers of flying too high. After all, we saw Icarus fall.

Philosophy is my way of flying.

木心 said that he used to think Nietzsche and Tolstoy were Icaruses who escaped the Labyrinth. But knowing them, I imagine they would rather fly higher to free-fall longer—for they, like I, have touched the sky.

Today's Labyrinth has grown. So we need bigger wings. But I fly because my parents bought me wax and feathers. I want to give every child wax and feathers,

This month, I asked the writers of Erasmus whether their degrees gave them wings. From music to sonder to noblemen to mediocrity, they'll tell you about their flight.

Very sincerely,

Elaine Cheng
Formerly and forever onwards, our Revolutionary Smurf

Sonder

The question, “why did you choose to do **that**?” is one I often hear, when I say that I study ‘Classics and Egyptology’. It is usually a question of curiosity, rather than a question of confusion that I chose to study a degree so specific and so good at leading to no job in particular. I have often wondered at my own decision, especially now these four years of undergraduate are over and I have to consider what comes next.

Was it the primary school library that piqued my interest in the two subjects? This has been my stock answer: I read through the mini school library like there was no tomorrow, and stumbled my way into world encyclopedias, developing an interest in the wider world but in Egypt in particular. I think I stand by that assessment, but would like to add, unashamedly, that I have watched every episode of Horrible Histories, and still have the Monarchs song memorised. No doubt that has influenced my character.

But what is it that I love most? That is a much harder question to answer. I hope that these short ramblings in essai form begin to explain my truest and steadiest devotion to these subjects.

Love. I don’t feel that love quite covers the amazement, excitement, wonder, and awe that I feel for the Ancient World. Sonder is the way I feel most often, if one can be

sonder about the many generations that came before us. As a word, it encompasses the recognition that each individual is the main character of their own life. The fact that there were real people, who thought, felt, laughed, loved, grieved and lived as we do is a something that I cannot and should never forget – and would encourage the reader to ponder over.

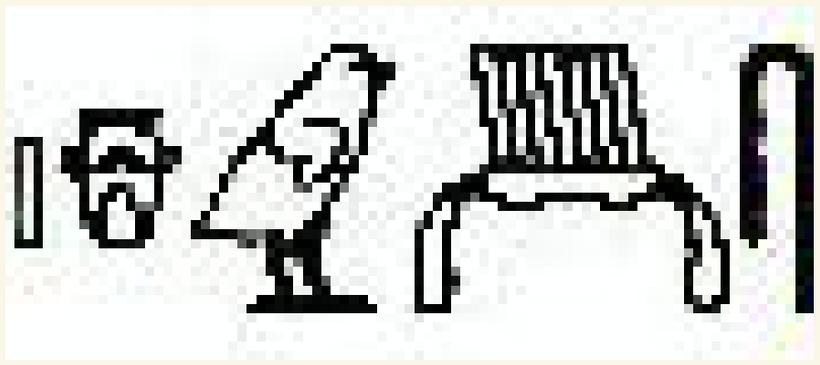
Trying to find these people, however, is hard. Especially when the ancient cultures have been received by modern ones in ways that push agendas of difference, superiority, primitivism and the like. That is, Greece has been pushed and promoted to the top of the ancient cultural pecking order in academia here and elsewhere, with Rome not far behind, as the foundations of most modern European countries; Egypt and the Middle Eastern world have been pushed lower into a kind of mysticism – particularly Egypt, with the prominence after the unveiling of Tutankhamun of spooky 'mummy' stories making their way into the media, full of horror, curses and, as always, the idea of 'the other' as distinct from the 'civilized'. We always bring with us a modern lens, bending light using our experiences and our own history. The Ancient world cannot be seen clearly using such a lens, but it is so difficult to shake that lens off. Putting on academic glasses doesn't always help either. In fact, sometimes it makes it worse, with snobbishness taking over. This is particularly challenging (though also rewarding) – the act of trying to shake off the assumptions of my own culture and understand another.

On the other hand... Pure wonder! Not just at the feats of the generations far before us, but also at the human nature itself. Humans are so complex and interesting, and I will never get enough of studying them – past or present. Who was it who created that object? Who commissioned it? Who saw it? What was it meant to make the audience feel? What do I feel?

What was going through the mind of the scribe when they wrote this? And then there is the ancient drama: why are they divorcing? Who are the parents of that child? Why are the houses being extended? What did that slave do? Who stole what? Why did that guy turn up to work? Who was the real murderer? It is the study of humans, I guess, that compels me most. How did they live? How did they exist? How did they see and interact with the world they inhabited?

That is what I love most about my degree, for sure; yet frustrations still occur. Much of what the everyday working human being did is lost to the modern observer. Be that due to loss or lack of evidence, or failure in scholarship to see the worth of the servant, farmer, labourer, maid and so forth – it is irritating to me each time I come across it. I mourn the loss of vibrancy and colour. One of the things I hope to research in my masters is the patterning and decoration shown in Ancient Egyptian tomb wall paintings, to try to recover the world of ephemeral arts that have been tragically lost – like fabrics, leathers and the like, very little of which is extant due to climate factors. Yet, fabrics and colour would have been all around the home, and such a big part of life!

It seems fair to end with something I have learnt that will stick with me. This is a simple phrase in Middle Egyptian (that is, the written language of the Middle Kingdom, a period of Egyptian civilization that runs from about 2010-1620BC, give or take a few decades). It is the Ancient Egyptian way of saying that they were happy: literally, ‘my heart lengthens’. That is, your heart has to expand to fit in the full emotion that is joy – and certainly joy does feel like that! Joy bursts at the seams, and this simple two word phrase captures that perfectly. What it also captures, is my admiration of the subjects I study. And so it is fitting to write in conclusion:



Hannah Treece

our Grim Sleeper

The humanising humanities

In an era dominated by rapid technological advancements and an unwavering emphasis on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) education, the humanities often find themselves relegated to the sidelines. The study of history, literature, philosophy, and the arts is frequently dismissed as impractical or irrelevant in our data-driven world. Yet, what if the humanities hold an intrinsic value that transcends their perceived lack of immediate utility? What if their true worth lies not in economic metrics but in their ability to enrich and sustain the human experience?

The modern age is characterized by an insatiable quest for innovation and efficiency. Technology promises solutions to our most pressing problems, from climate change to healthcare. Science and engineering drive the development of new products and services that enhance our lives. In this context, the humanities may seem like anachronistic luxuries, unable to compete with the tangible benefits provided by technical disciplines. The argument is straightforward: why invest in what appears to be abstract and subjective when the tangible and objective can deliver concrete results?

Yet, this perspective overlooks a fundamental aspect of human existence: our need for meaning. The humanities

delve into the very essence of what it means to be human. They explore our past, question our present, and imagine our future. History provides context, helping us understand how we arrived at this point. Literature offers insights into the human condition, allowing us to see the world through different eyes. Philosophy challenges us to think critically and examine our beliefs. The arts inspire and provoke, evoking emotions that transcend language and logic.

Consider the Renaissance, a period marked not just by scientific discoveries but also by a profound cultural awakening. Figures like Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo were not confined to the sciences or the arts but excelled in both, embodying the integration of technical skill and humanistic inquiry. Their work continues to influence and inspire, demonstrating that the confluence of these disciplines can lead to extraordinary achievements. The Renaissance was a testament to the power of the humanities to foster creativity and holistic thinking, which in turn fueled technological and scientific advancements.

Fast forward to the 20th century and the civil rights movement in the United States. The speeches of Martin Luther King Jr., such as his iconic "I Have a Dream" speech, drew heavily on historical, philosophical, and religious texts. These speeches did more than mobilize a movement; they articulated a vision of justice and humanity that resonated deeply across cultural and racial boundaries. King’s ability to draw on the humanities to frame the struggle for civil rights underscores their power to inspire and effect profound social change.

The modern world, with all its advancements, also brings complexity and uncertainty. Technological progress can lead to ethical dilemmas, social upheaval, and existential

questions. The humanities equip us with the tools to navigate these challenges. By fostering critical thinking, empathy, and ethical reasoning, they enable us to make informed and thoughtful decisions. In a world where artificial intelligence and automation are poised to replace many jobs, these uniquely human skills become ever more valuable.

Moreover, the humanities cultivate a sense of connectedness. They remind us that we are part of a larger narrative, one that spans time and geography. This sense of continuity and shared experience is crucial in an increasingly fragmented society. As we become more interconnected through technology, the humanities provide a counterbalance, emphasizing our shared humanity and fostering a sense of belonging. They encourage dialogue and understanding, bridging cultural and ideological divides.

Consider the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic. While scientists and healthcare professionals worked tirelessly to combat the virus, it was through literature, art, and philosophy that people found solace and understanding in a time of isolation and uncertainty. The stories of past pandemics, like Daniel Defoe’s "A Journal of the Plague Year" or Albert Camus’s "The Plague," offered eerie parallels and profound insights into the human condition. These works provided context and comfort, demonstrating the enduring power of the humanities to help us make sense of our experiences.

The value of the humanities extends beyond individual enrichment. They play a crucial role in shaping the collective conscience. Democracies thrive on informed and engaged citizens. The humanities nurture this engagement by encouraging curiosity, skepticism, and a willingness to engage with complex issues. They remind us that progress is

not merely a matter of technological advancement but also of moral and ethical growth.

Here lies the remarkable and perhaps counterintuitive conclusion: In an age dominated by technology and efficiency, the humanities are not merely relevant but essential. They provide the depth and perspective necessary to navigate a rapidly changing world. They offer a counterpoint to the reductionist view that values only what can be measured and quantified. By embracing the humanities, we preserve the richness of the human experience and ensure that our technological progress is guided by wisdom and compassion.

Our journey through the logic of this argument reveals a profound truth: The humanities, far from being obsolete, are vital to our future. They teach us to think critically, feel deeply, and act ethically. They connect us to our past and to each other, fostering a sense of shared humanity. In valuing the humanities, we affirm that progress is not just about what we achieve but also about who we become. In a world increasingly defined by algorithms and automation, it is the humanities that remind us of our humanity.

Elia Turing
our experiment

The Interest of Interests

‘His fresh-green heart shone; loved it but went on
Through his own roots back
To boundless origin, easily outlived
His little birth…’ (Rilke, Third Elegy)

It is not uncommon today for us to put forward ‘curiosity’ or ‘interest’ as reasons in themselves for our actions, or as the guiding currents of our lives and their courses. This looks at first like a heavy burden for them to bear. These temperamental, nomadic impulses seem ill-fitted to almost any responsibility we could give them, enticing as they undoubtedly are. Given this, it is worth considering how we could incorporate them into our lives and into our self-understanding, and what they might have to teach us about ourselves.

Heidegger in his essay, ‘What is called Thinking’, mentions the etymology of our English word for interest, an etymology which is shared in German. ‘Interest’ comes from the Latin inter-esse, meaning to be amongst things and in their midst. The connotation here is intimate – ‘interest’ is not something we launch at things from a comfortable silo of individuality but entails in this reading a mingling of ourselves with the

object of our attention. In present usage we sometimes deploy the term to imply that we are not heavily invested at a personal level in a given thing, but still keep an eye on it because it excites some mild passion in us. I want to suggest even such a fleeting flicker is indicative of something and may instruct us on the way to a deeper self-knowledge. This is not to say that every interest should be pursued for its own sake, but that its connotations for our own individuality should be considered.

One exuberantly bright afternoon, I discussed with a friend for several hours his keen and long held interest in mediaeval chivalric texts. It was an idiosyncrasy which had struck me for some time, and which I felt would be a taproot, leading us down an untrod path into the rumbling depths of the soul. Though I wasn’t disappointed, our four or five hours of discussion did not come close to fencing in the elusive feelings which underpinned my friend’s ostensibly academic interest in the subject. What we could say for certain was that it was in no sense an arbitrary or random affixion, and nor was it thematically isolated in the broader landscape of the psyche. The process of understanding a desire is analogous to what some have said about the process of understanding a dream, in that its 'interpretation' is considered to often be most fruitful in the context of the person's own life and an understanding of their own emotional charges. Carl Jung, for one, viewed as pivotal the role that intuition and feeling play in coming to a full interpretation of a dream. My conversation partner drew the emotive connections between his interests and values with remarkably fluency.

This person is among the best-dressed and generally well-kept that I have known, and had no trouble in feeling out a connection of this tendency, both to his academic interests, and to a kind of nostalgia for certain aspects of the past. A

deep desire for some kind of heroism seemed to be finding its expression in these disparate tendencies and interests, a departure from the mundanities of everyday life. His longing did not flow into an object, or even a time-bound experience, but to an archetype, a pattern, a way of being in the world. Why these particular avenues appealed to him and not others is perhaps something for the reader to ponder, and to consider whether there is any thread that runs through their own interests. Over our brief time together a collage of idiosyncrasies began to be connected, but there came a point where our words began to falter, and we could only go on paraphrasing ourselves for lack of further insight. This at least was my experience. So often at the end of these enquiries there are more questions than answers, and when answers do come they do so, as it were, in their own time.

It may become clear now that our desires and interests have a certain coherence to them, and a coherence that often becomes clear only with reflection. That our interests are something we can decipher with more or less proficiency, indicates that they are not something we choose entirely for ourselves.

We commonly speak of ‘taking an interest’, the active participle here implies that our interests are something we take on for ourselves, that we can sculpt at will the smooth and pliable marble of our mind. This is, of course, quite misleading. Most students will know the experience of running into a topic that they simply cannot muster the will to understand, or at the very least have to struggle to do so. At the same time, an active interest taken often resembles an itch, a drive to learn or understand a thing which is, for a time, insatiable. Our interests then seem to be largely outside of our immediate remit and are more something we are given than something we take. The question then emerges: where do they arise from?

It is an eerie prospect for many of us to consider that something integral to our self-identity is so much outside our own control, at least in the short-term. Our interests seem now to well up from subterranean depths within us and bespeak a kind of mystery. As Rilke so wonderfully puts it:

‘...We don’t love like the flowers, with just
The force of a single year; when we love,
Ancient sap is rising.’

The distance between ‘love’ and interest semantically is vast, but in our lives we often find them separated by a few short steps. The early stages of romantic love are often euphemistically described in terms of ‘interest’; one expresses their ‘interest’ in a prospective partner. Like interest, love is not something we can control the direction or intensity of, frequently to our dismay. As its etymology indicates, taking an interest means bringing oneself among things, into contact with them, and is love not the most deepest form of contact? Exploring this connection, it is hoped, might heighten the sense of significance around this discussion. Our interests tend to float on the surface of our minds, while most would agree that true love emerges from a more mysterious and shadowy place.

Many have their speculations as to the origin of both these sometimes inscrutable drives. What seems clear is that on the way up from the depths to the surface of our awareness, the signal often becomes distorted and hard to decipher, and we end up pursuing something which is against our ‘best interests’ as it were. For this reason, it can be challenging to make the connection between an interest or desire that presents itself to us, and the deeper, more substantive need that it bespeaks. How often have our desires migrated, and seemed finally to put down roots before packing up, quite

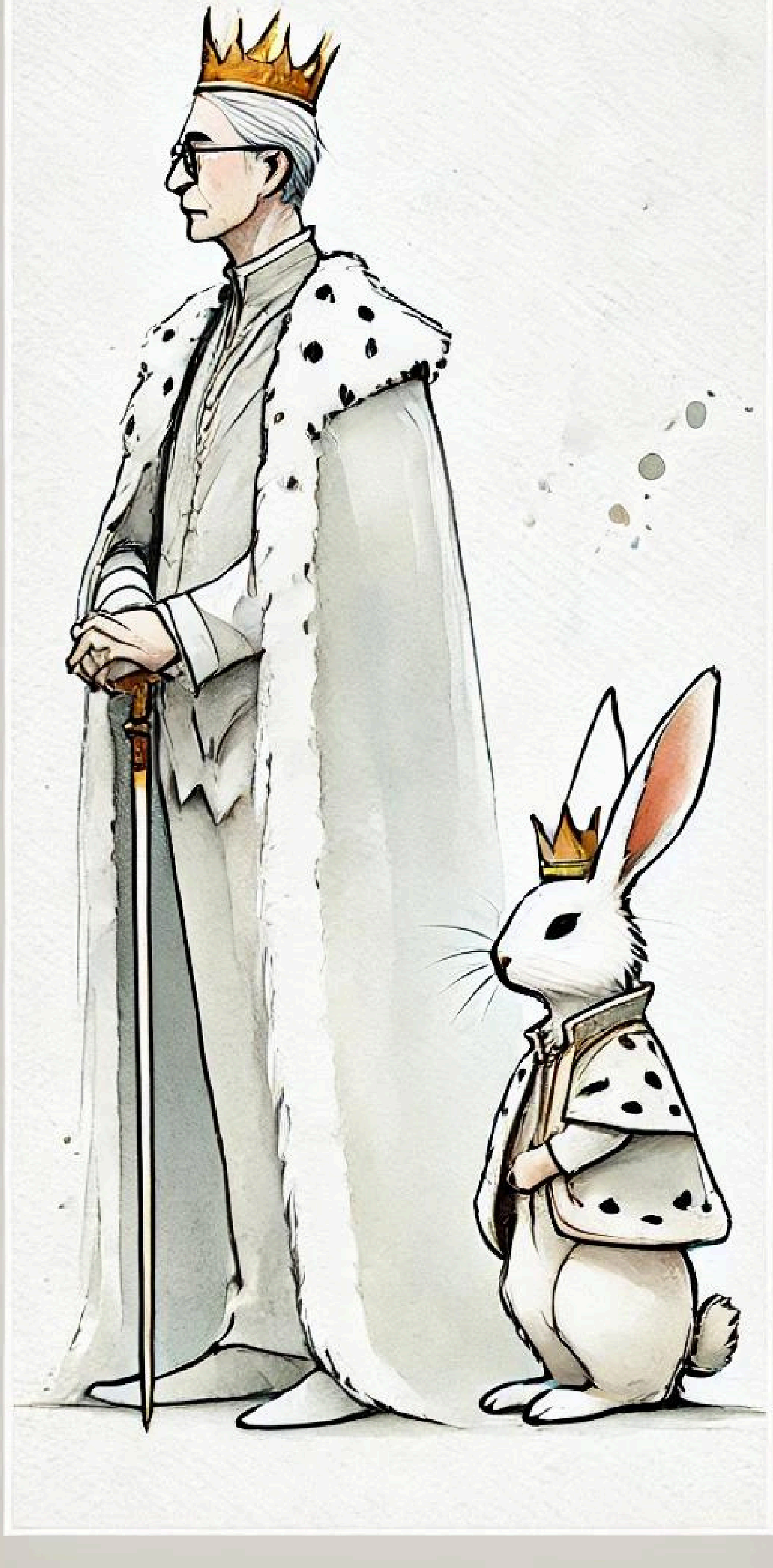
against our own wishes, and moving again to some new pasture?

Above I wrote of how desire does not seem to find its end in objects or in episodic experiences, say a holiday or a meeting with a friend, though these no doubt can offer us much joy, and serve as important waystations on our journey. Should we wish to make our final home in them, though, we are sure to be left wanting.

What a frenzy, a whirl, the eye of a glittering storm. A thousand surging currents vying to whistle through our open wounds, then touch our hearts. To be inter esse can be to be tugged at and vied for, and in the worst case torn apart shred by shred. Nietzsche once described himself as a battlefield, and upon reflection this seems to be the condition of most of us. The task is then is to make a melody of the din and racket of our hearts, to bring things into place.

My hope with this piece has been to provoke thought more than to present it. My own inexperience in plumbing the inner depths prevent me from speaking with a decisive clarity on the matter, but what I've seen of others who have is that their findings are often better captured in poetic images and symbols than in propositional statements. In gazing at our interests, or through them, we are liable to find horrors and wonders that we had not dreamed they could contain.

Zakaria Najjar
our Sunset Poet



Rabbits and Noblemen: A Panorama of Theology

Students are the nobility of our time, especially at Oxford. We spend most of our time sitting languidly, gazing over paper, tickling a keyboard, attending private meetings with learned people in furnished rooms. We make very ample time for leisure of which a good deal is occupied by the venerable sport of drinking, and other more refined activities. We have pressures and responsibilities, and many would choose another kind of life; but ask anyone mature to describe student life, and they will say that (whatever it is) it is not real life, nor the real world. The truth is that the life of a student, especially of a humanities student, is a rare chance to live in the stratosphere and to inherit for a moment both the outlook of a nobleman and the rhythm of the bohemian. The trials of this way of life should not obscure the fact it is a special kind of life, hugely privileged at least in aspiration if not in practice.

Now the office of the student, as it were, can be embraced, ignored, or abused, just like that of the noble. Empty lectures, lethargic tutorials, skimmed readings, obsessing over marks—these common malpractices suggest most of us fall in the latter two categories, ignored or abused. What then does it mean to embrace the office of student? A sage from

the past, and no doubt many professors around today, might say it consists of the life of the mind, and say it with the expectation that you will directly sense the greatness of the ideal. To most ordinary people, the phrase sounds dreadful or at least very dull. To live in one's head is everywhere acknowledged as a vice, and 'to live the life of the mind' comes very close to it in meaning. And yet, Aristotle or Boethius or Kant would assure us that the life of the mind is a virtue, and perhaps the only one worth wholly dedicating oneself to.

I find studying generally pleasant, at least when it offers windows and frames through which to see the world and humanity more clearly. No doubt it is an odd kind of pleasure. To put it differently, it means enriching a universal view with a particular insight. It also happens that the subject of theology (in my view) examines the most important questions and the most convincing answers, which removes any risk of pedantry or obscurity and makes the field not merely 'interesting', but nothing less than thrilling.

And there is more to this happy friendship between intellectual life and theology. Even from a historical view they are closely bound up. In Europe it was the medieval monks who fostered the science of study and the art of manuscripts, and for a long time 'intellectual' was knotted with 'cleric'. The universities were basically monastic; in some odd ways Oxford still is. Even the intellectuals of antiquity could not avoid questions of spirituality and (certainly not) of metaphysics. The intellectual's preoccupation with cosmos, humanity, and the spiritual is of course mainstream to a variety of cultures and traditions. Simply put, theology in the broadest sense appears to have monopolized intellectual history. One can almost hear it insinuating that any serious thinker has to begin and end

with theology, as the science which addresses both human origin and destiny.

Ambitious claims indeed, and a bit foreign to those of us who prefer to view theology and religion as a curiosity of history, or an aberration of more primitive societies. At minimum it should be evident that, on a theological view of things, the life of the mind acquires immense meaning and motivation. This is because truth suddenly becomes Truth, and, for the Christian, to study is to listen to the spirit of God itself. The life of the mind gains a cosmic dimension. 'Profound work', said the French Dominican A.G. Sertillanges, 'consists in this: to let the truth sink into one, to be quietly submerged by it, to lose oneself in it, not to think that one is thinking, nor that one exists, nor that anything in the world exists but truth itself'. It is a far cry from our daily experiences in the library, though perhaps we have on some rare occasions tasted what he meant.

The task of a student also has the quality of being stubbornly open-ended. Answers are disguised questions; satiety leads to hunger; the periods after our sentences too often seem inadequate. This is particularly true of the theological student, who is confronted with gigantic and impenetrable ideas; but it is universally noted by all perceptive students. The "rabbit hole" is symptomatic of this reality, and I am inclined to think, despite popular connotation, that rabbit holes are good and necessary, so long as we do emerge into daylight at the other end. The rabbit is in fact a working analogy for the intellectual: it alternates deep digging of the earth with swift and far-reaching surveys of the land; so too a good thinker is both specialized and holistic, penetrating and cultured. And neither the rabbit nor the intellectual will ever get the job done: both have a limitless occupation which can be finalised only by death.

In a similar vein, the physicist Jean-Baptiste Biot was once addressed with the words, 'I am going to ask you an interesting question', only to reply that 'It's no use: if your question is interesting, I do not know the answer'. Far from interpreting this attitude as skepticism or relativism, I think it is fair to say that the practice of the mind has the effect of opening up the whole person, like opening the windows of a stale room—of broadening and expanding the spirit, of deepening convictions and widening perspectives. Sertillanges thought so: 'Study is intended to bring about the extension of our being: it must not end by making us narrow. If art is man added to nature, knowledge is nature added to man: in both cases we must safeguard the man'. To refine an earlier point, we are speaking here of nobility of soul, of magnanimity, magnus - animus. This is the only kind of nobility that matters.

A trivial personal example will gesture towards the deeper and more radical expansions of the studying spirit that I have in mind. Through my studies I came to a realization to which I think many of us would be quite sympathetic, and which constitutes a broadening of vision. Namely, that Christian theology is the last thing to be guilty of Western-centrism or even Eurocentrism. Not just the Gospels themselves, but also ensuing Christian theology finds a vibrant and diverse heritage in Greece, Palestine, Turkey, Egypt, Algeria, Syria, Ethiopia, Russia. The Latin medieval church so easily associated with the phrase 'Christian theology' is but one chapter, long as it is, in a monstrously rich story. Any one of these Christian cultures taken aside and studied in a little depth will reveal an entire social climate, philosophical tradition, and aesthetic sense, all central to the content and form of its theology. 'Richness' is the only word that can capture this aspect of Christian theology; and like all riches, it needs a spirit free from both avarice and indifference to be properly appreciated.

If there is one thing left to lament from the whole affair of the past few years, it is the apparent individualism of many Oxford degrees and students. The natural and destined habitat for me and many others was the library chair, along with quiet absorption in the task of the day, and firm separation from my fellow students by the wooden edges on the Bodleian desks. Tutorials provided excellent contact with the tutors; but somehow the same was less easy with peers. We were treated as mini-scholars, and scholars, on the whole, get work done on their own. There was a real risk for the life of mind to become 'living in one's head', for solitude to become isolation. Social contact was plenty; but close intellectual dialogue among students about one's reading or research did not come naturally, and was achievable to varying degrees according to circumstances. It often seemed that man is indeed an island: heaven forbid we should go on in life with that outlook.

All this said, it was a very fine time. We lived like little nobles. We sometimes worked hard, we often enjoyed ourselves. I had heard of the whimsically named 'life of the mind', and now having tasted it, must deal with a desire and a longing for it which is unlike other desires. I know of others who have caught the same bug. In the end the degree was like of one of those dreams which leaves you scratching our head, pining for it and fleeing from it at the same time, and certain that it brought something deep and mystical prepared for our betterment and instruction. This dream, needless to say, should not be taken lightly.

Andrei Lambert
our petit philosophe

What a music degree is *really* like

“So, what instrument do you play?”

From coffee shops to clubs and from the dinner table to Tesco’s checkout, this is the first question every Music student gets - and it’s become the default conversation starter. But while the defining characteristic of a musician is their instrument, it isn’t always the same for a Music student.

Once I get past that question in conversation, people are baffled by what my degree actually entails. There are two key places to study Music in higher education: a conservatoire, and a university. Generally, conservatoires are where you study Music in the traditional sense, of picking an instrument and training to be absolutely brilliant at it - the storybook cultivation of operatic singers and first-chair violinists. Music at university is often much more research-based and varied: performance becomes just one of many options.

The final undergraduate Music course at Oxford is rather complex, but I’ll do my best to summarise it. The two compulsory modules are based on historical periods and genres within music. They involve a very detailed study of the history and ideology of music as it lives in its particular environment. It can be quite a jarring paper, because one

question may be an essay on women in pop music while another may be on string quartets.

Outside of the compulsory topics, you get to pick from a confusing array of additional modules. Someone once made a flow chart to try to explain them. Options include musical analysis, composition (both stylistic and experimental), performance (both solo and group, including conducting), and additional topics with longer written assessments. Dissertations and specialised dissertations (either ethnographic or analytical) are also among these options. All of these courses can be as adventurous as the researcher. One example of a Music student's past endeavour is researching the use of silence in music (both the deliberate use of silence, and moments like the pause between the end of a piece and the ensuing applause). Another student studied vinyl record shops across the country, and another was taken by queer theory's interactions with drag performance and lip-syncing.

My own module choices at Oxford make for a good case study, especially in comparison to some of my peers. I chose Recording and Producing, Music Ethnography, Community Music and Free Improvisation. By contrast, some of my peers are studying Orchestration, Dissertation, 70s rock music, and medieval music. We each walk out of Oxford with a unique skill set. On paper, we all have a BA in Music, but in reality, we are each our own version of a musician.

Performance itself is an entire field of study within music. Many cultures around the world teach music orally, but the Western world has a persistent occupation with containing music in the score. This has created a strong hierarchy and distinction between the genius composer and the performer who lives to serve. As an improviser and a primarily self-taught performer, I have never understood this need to so

insistently put music-making in a box. Performance isn't just translating a score like a machine: we are human, and we impart ourselves - to a large or small extent - on everything we interact with.

I study Music because I love learning about the deep entanglement of culture with music-making: many forms of music were born from self-expression and finding a medium to articulate things that were happening in the world, and through music, we have been able to connect with people who are physically miles away. My degree constantly challenges the locus of music and asks us to consider whether music exists in the score, in a particular recording or live performance, or somewhere even more abstract. Music can exist in so many forms—performance is just one of them.

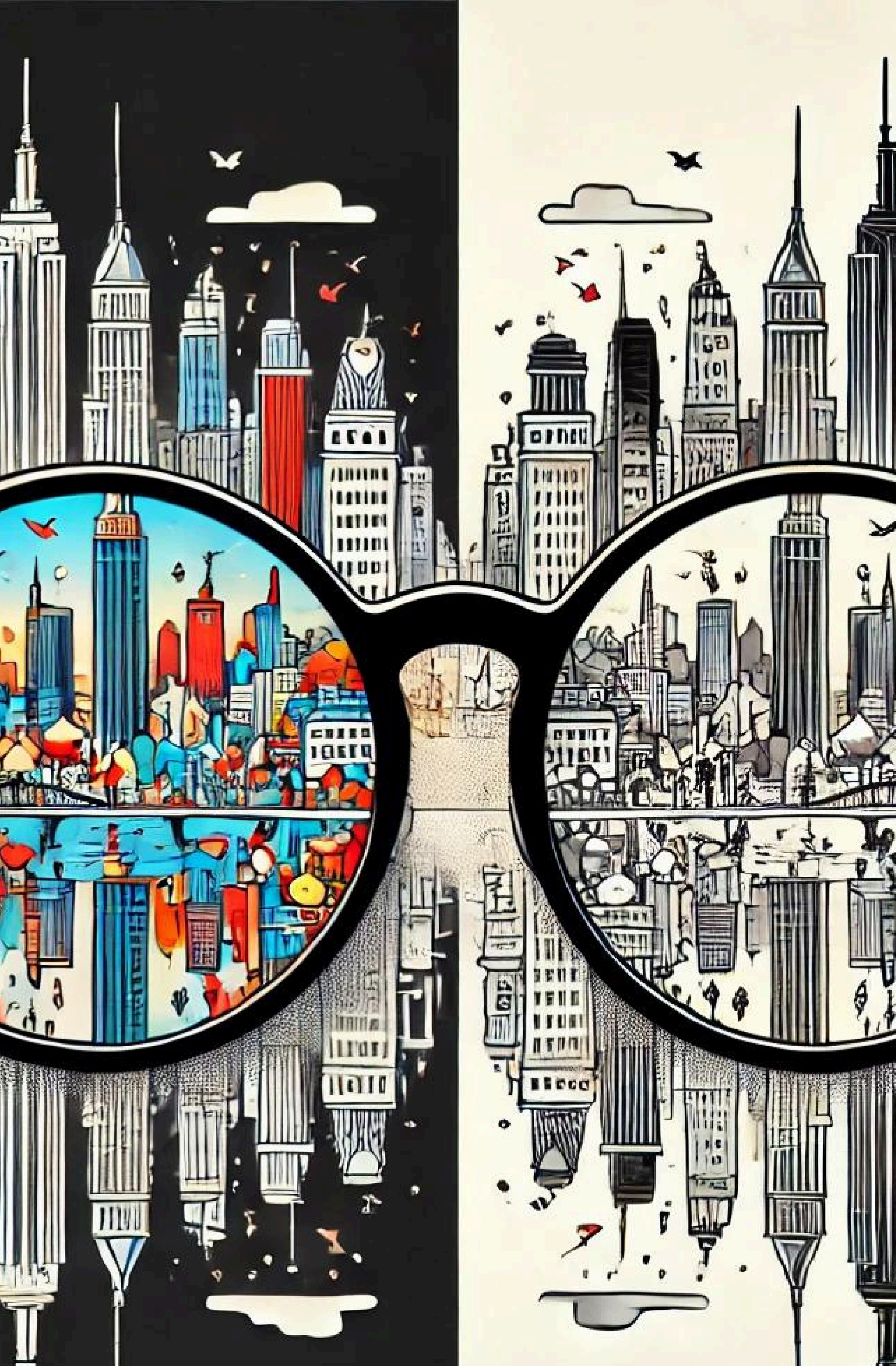
Surprisingly, Music is extraordinarily interdisciplinary. Music can hardly exist without the context of culture. For example, one can't really study jazz without understanding the impact of racism and colonialism. Take Glenn Horiuchi as a fascinating case study: he was an American jazz pianist and shamisen player who wrote a piece called Manzanar Voices. He named this piece after a concentration camp built to incarcerate Japanese Americans during World War II. His music exists both as its own unit and as a component of its wider context. His work was entangled with his experiences, and it drove the Asian-American jazz movement forward. Music is a gateway to studying history, art, philosophy, politics, sociology, psychology, and many other disciplines together in various ratios.

I've had some of my most enjoyable conversations with musicians and non-musicians alike. Music allows me to understand the world in so many different ways, and it has been a lifeline for me during the most difficult parts of my

life. Performance is often where music exists in the everyday, but even within that, there are many kinds of performances. I'd love for you to ask me what I love about music rather than just the instrument I play - a more interesting topic we could discuss for hours.

Sami Jalil

our resident noisemaker



What's there to love about History, anyway?

I was always a rather argumentative child – I stopped being such the moment I grew into being a rather argumentative adult. Perhaps my epithet of being the 'resident contrarian' hints at this, though I'd argue against that given the chance. History for me began as less of a subject, and more an arsenal of things I could use to argue with my dad. What better way to disprove someone's argument than by a counter-example? The vast wealth of History proves many such counter-examples. History, I would later learn, is distinct from the Past, as History is what historians write about the past. So History is created from information about the past. Whether I should be grateful to historians or past happenings was generally immaterial to me as a child, as a win is a win.

My interactions with History as a subject, rather than just a room full of shiny metaphorical guns, rocket launchers, and explosive devices, was in school. This was a miserable experience that nearly killed my love of the subject on several occasions. Really, it was a number of essayists on YouTube and Reddit that made me truly enjoy what is a core part of History – research.

clause fundamentally ambiguous. You may feel that this is a trivial, overblown investigation into sentences written centuries ago.

However, these inconsistent uses of punctuation affect far more significant texts, namely the second amendment.

What's more, the erratic use of semicolons by those glorified revolutionaries could actually have profound consequences for the very existence of certain US states. In their widely respected piece "Is West Virginia Unconstitutional?", Vasan Kesavan and Michael Stokes Paulsen dedicated 90 pages to ascertain the meaning of that second semi-colon in clause 1.

Why? Well, the ambiguity of the semicolon (as opposed to a full stop or a comma) means that the provision "without the Consent of the Legislatures" may or may not pertain to the second part of that sentence ("but no new States shall be formed or erected within the Jurisdiction of any other State"). West Virginia would quite literally be unconstitutional and would potentially be made to merge with Virginia. Due to the distribution of support of the main parties, that would redound to the advantage of Republicans as the combined state would undoubtedly be red. Fortunately for West Virginians, after much deliberation and investigation, in essence, the semi-colon was deemed to be a comma.

One of the deciding factors, I believe, was the choice of "nor" which would never realistically open a new sentence. The semi-colon could therefore never be interpreted as a full stop and the requirement of the Consent of the Legislatures therefore does modify the possibility of forming a new state within another.

Having established the possibility of subdividing a state,

History is effectively a constant cross-examination of evidence. In very much the same way that a lawyer will cross-examine witnesses, or a detective will look at forensics, a historian looks at sources. The historian will dig around in various places, usually archives, to find information, then scrutinise it and find out things that are interesting about it, then put them into a final piece of work. What I'm basically saying is that the term 'historian' is really just describing a certain specialisation of 'researcher' – and it's the research that is really fun. It's like going foraging, or hunting a prey by its tracks like the hunters of yore. Taking a piece of knowledge, and then somehow extracting from it even more knowledge, feels quite rewarding, like if you could actually get blood from a rock.

You may have noticed that I haven't really discussed an actual interest in the past – and that's in part because most of the time I'm not particularly interested in the past on its own. A lot of historians are – they like looking at the past for its own sake. It's a noble goal, and produces a lot of valuable information, but it's not really what I see as the best part of the subject. I see History as being effectively a search for what is ahistorical – meaning, what parts of human society and nature are inherent parts of humanity. For instance, I was recently doing a paper that involves a lot of Queer History – looking at the evidence we can see that while certain desires have always existed among people, how they are expressed and whether they form an identity are actually very variable and individual. History allows the discovery of the rocks in the river, those that shape the water that flow around them, but are not themselves shaped by it.

At least, I think History is useful for discovering the 'rocks' that exist for our current civilization, even if they are not universally applicable. Academics get very focused on

whether or not the knowledge that we can gain from History is universal, objective, or other such jargon. It doesn't really matter – the lessons learned from History can work in our context, and that's that. I suppose this gets me onto academic History, which I have a few bones to pick with.

The main problem, as I see it, with academic History is exactly how niche it is. Academic historians tend to really lean into studying History for its own sake, and so often allow themselves very long and very specific studies. To be blunt, I am often saddened seeing a book that must have taken years and years to write, and that is so specific it's bound to be read by no more than a hundred people, and of those hundred people none are likely to read it in full. History is a wonderful tool of education, and it is wasted if people are not exposed to it. The video game 'Pathologic 2' has an excellent quote that's relevant here:

"Truth does not do as much good in the world as its counterfeits do evil."

Historians, as masters of pedantry, are able to counter so much evil in the world that is born of ignorance, but seem to lock themselves away in the study of History for its own sake. There is so much good to be done by educating people about the past – even if this isn't done at school, but just between friends. There are many people who don't know how they got their right to vote, or the consequences of hating people based on inherent characteristics.

I hope I've illustrated that, whether as a degree or as a discipline, I have primarily loved History as a means to an end. It can solve problems, or help solve problems, or teach you how to solve problems. In some ways, History is as much vocational training in research as it is academic – ultimately, it can be a highly practical degree.

All that being said, ultimately the study of History helps colour the world. Seeing and knowing the depth and context between everyday objects, buildings, institutions, books, paintings, and countries. Knowing why the lines on the map are where they are, and why it is that where I live is a Kingdom and not a Republic. Perhaps that is the most valuable of all, and all it does is simply make life more interesting.

Nicholas Haque
our resident contrarian

Media on inner space

Streams of social and mainstream media continuously pour information into us, depriving us of our inner space. This can result in a contamination of our inner sanctuaries where external agents harvest our energy for their own aspirations and profits.

Without a protected inner space, our capacity to reflect on our authentic feelings and creative thoughts may become profoundly impeded, as we are constantly suspended in the volatile and discordant theatres of fragmented stimuli that never cease to infringe upon our inner frontiers.

As these externally invasive agents infilitrate, possess and breed in our inner space, there is a severe risk to the integrity and robustness of our psycho-emotional health and stability, as we may lose the clarity and focus necessary to address our own inner conflicts and unresolved traumas.
When our minds are inundated with floods of ceaseless media, our sense of individuality can become diluted in the tempests of these tides, leaving us unable to detect the root causes of issues that specifically matter to the quality of our lives.

Everyone will invariably experience some form of trauma at some stage, whether that be loss, bereavement, childhood

sues, financial struggles, identity crisises, self esteem issues, finding a sense of purpose, adapting to changes and feelings of isolation, anxiety and depression. However, if we are fixated and consumed by the vast expanse of media entering our minds and impacting our emotions with sporadic unpredictabililty, we may find ourselves incapable of focusing on the issues and traumas that matter to the harmony of our lives.

In a time when multiple sources of information are instantly accessible from numerous media platforms, there is a palpable sense of one idea or concept blending into the next without the possibility of clarity and reflection, before the next wave of information suffocates any opportunity to make space for inner reflection and focus.

The mind becomes overwhelmed as pieces of scattered information occupy our thoughts and lay siege to them with constant ideas that languish in a distorted perception of time and space. Our minds become dominated by the relentless desire to habitually assimilate more information out of anxiety and fear that we may miss something important in the ceaseless stream of media desperate to leech our energy. Meanwhile, our inner traumas continue to proliferate as they are neglected, while our thoughts and feelings become entangled and fragmented amidst the ideas possessing our minds. Consequently, we may never address our own inner traumas, as we are awash with trying to decipher the horde information occupying our inner space.

We risk becoming enslaved by the insatiable addiction to follow the gushing rivers and subsequent floods of information that never stop at any shore where a holistic view or period of respite can be possible. This engenders a sense of internal flooding that prevents us detaching

ourselves from the fountains of information lest we drown in the accumulated toxins laying at the seabeds of our minds. In reality, we could already be drowning, but we fail to recognise this as the proliferation of stimulation maintains us in a state of illusory connectivity, while our inner traumas continue to remain unresolved, affecting our feelings from a subconscious level of discontent and desperation.

The concepts of living vicariously through media and technology have been well explored by critics and analysts of how media impacts the quality of our lives. However, the inflated influx of invasive information can potentially render an individual a fragmented series of shards all reflecting the various agendas contained in the mass stream of information they subtly and overtly digest. This intense bombardment of external influence becomes an addictive compulsion that seeks to suffocate our minds and deprive us of the oxygen and liberty to summon our own original feelings and reflect on our ideas in a manner that could be conducive to our own capacity to value and heal ourselves.

While we struggle in this tempest of ever swelling information possessing our neurons and spirits, the inner battle of trying to distinguish between truth and falsity inflicts a sense of paralysing bewilderment on our psyches, leaving us lost in a wild storm and expanding forest of doubts, confusion and insecurity that fuel their destructive fires from our traumas and turmoil.

We become a fragmented effigy of broken pieces all representing different agendas and ideals that can never be reconciled with a sense of harmony where tranquility and certainty can be cultivated among the incessantly violent waves of distorted images and ideas drowning us in a merciless ocean of disharmony, where all the ruptured shards

of ourselves are enmeshed in the breathless and agonising gasps for air.

Our consciousness needs air and inner space to truly reflect on information without compromising our own healing, capacity to heal and ability to learn from experience. Without regular epidodes of inner cleansing and purification, such as embracing and finding our own interests without the constant influence social media, or simply abstaining from constant media exposore, we can become embodiments of discordant incongruencies that exist in the ethers of information desperate to invade and possess our consciousness as fuel for its own proliferation.

The mortal tragedy of such a consequence is that our individual capacity for expression is lost adrift in a sea of turbulent ideas and perceptions that belonged to those who desired to possess our consciousness for the enhancement of their own agenda.

Consciousness is a phenomenon that enables us to transcend our physical experiences with imagination. The external streams entering our bodies and minds with relentless fervour risk swallowing our individual capacity for contentment and purpose. Unless we can awaken the inner space within our minds we may risk becoming unwitting agents of various external agendas that do not necessary represent or reflect the true potential of our unique individual consciousness.

Within a blade of grass, a grain of sand, a glimmer of sunlight among moving clouds, a mystifying starry night of cosmic enchantment, there is healing and beauty to be found if we can summon the inner space and reflection to liberate our consciousness from the ceaseless tides of information that obscure our clarity and warp our perception.

Ultimately, each one of us has special place and purpose that belongs to our capacity to constantly realise it through conscious awareness where we are able to utilise our humanity to heal ourselves and those around us with focus on the beauty and light of being connected to nature's phenemonal features that glow and flow through the complex waves of time. In an age of digital information and global connectivity, it is imperative we remain connected to the inner voice that yearns to breathe in the light of our own capacity for rejuvenation and reflection.

Atif Adam

our star chaser

The Art of Economics

In the hallowed halls of academia where minds converge in pursuit of knowledge, there lies a discipline that stitches the fabric of society with the threads of logic and curiosity: Economics. For me, economics is the perfect blend of interdisciplinary knowledge, creative problem-solving, and logical reasoning. This realisation sparked my desire to delve deeper into a field that underpins everything from historical trends and consumer behaviour to financial markets.

Economics has a way of leading one down unexpected intellectual rabbit holes, each more fascinating than the last. For example, my dissertation focused on understanding why people buy certain products and how their decisions are influenced. I looked at how advertising convinces people to buy things, how people often follow what others are doing (like a herd), and how companies create strategies to attract customers. This research helped me see how our choices are not just about logical thinking but also about our emotions and the influence of others, making the complex world of economics more understandable and relatable.

What I find uniquely charming about economics is its dual nature—an art as much as a science. It offers the precision of mathematical models yet demands the creativity to interpret human behaviour. Economics draws upon diverse fields like

history, psychology, and even computer science to analyse how people make choices. For instance, understanding historical economic trends helps economists predict future market behaviour. Psychology reveals why consumers might prefer one product over another due to subconscious biases or emotional responses. Computer science, through data analysis and machine learning, enables economists to process large datasets and identify patterns in consumer behaviour that would be impossible to detect manually. This interdisciplinary approach allows for a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence economic decisions.

This balance has transformed my perspective on the world, allowing me to see it not merely as a series of transactions but as a complex web of interdependent actions and reactions. Initially, I viewed the world through a narrow lens, focusing primarily on the obvious monetary transactions and economic exchanges. This perspective was influenced by the common portrayal of economics in popular media, which often emphasises financial markets, profit margins, and the movement of money. However, as I delved deeper into the field, I realised that economics is not just bound by these monetary transactions. It encompasses a wide range of human interactions and societal dynamics.

Economics involves understanding how historical events shape current economic policies, how psychological factors influence consumer behaviour, and how technological advancements can revolutionise markets. For example, my dissertation on "Hype-onomics: Persuasive Advertising, Herd Behaviour, and Market Strategies in Tech and Fashion" opened my eyes to the psychological elements that drive consumer choices and the collective behaviours that can lead to market trends. This broader view revealed that economic

activities are deeply interconnected with social, cultural, and technological factors, making it a far more intricate and fascinating field than I initially imagined.

However, the path is not without its challenges. The rigorous demands of quantitative methods and the sometimes abstract nature of economic theory can be daunting. More frustrating still is the academic world's occasional detachment from practical realities. The pursuit of intellectual purity often clashes with the messy, nuanced world outside university walls. For instance, in university, economic models assume that people always make rational decisions based on available information. However, in the real world, people's decisions are often influenced by emotions, misinformation, and unpredictable factors. This disconnect can make it challenging to apply theoretical concepts to real-life situations accurately. This harshness can be a source of frustration, as the theoretical part of models sometimes fails to account for the unpredictability of human nature and societal change.

One of the most significant challenges I faced was the transition from a BA to a BSc in Economics. The standard requirement for a BSc was an A in A-level Mathematics, which I struggled with, especially since I had not taken Additional Maths in SPM (Malaysian Certificate of Education, is a national examination sat for by all fifth-form secondary school students in Malaysia; the GCSE (British) equivalent) and was in an accelerated 15-month A-levels programme. This led to my decision to drop A-level Maths halfway through, which was necessary for my mental health but seemed to close the door on a BSc in Economics.

Despite this, my determination to excel in Economics never waned. I enrolled in Calculus and Statistics modules,

achieving some of the highest marks in my year and earning a role as a peer-assisted learning mentor. I further developed my econometric skills through advanced Maths modules, consistently scoring 80+ and 90+ marks. Realising these modules were compulsory for BSc students, I petitioned the university to switch my programme from BA to BSc. My university-level performance in Mathematics proved my capability and dedication.

Reflecting on my journey, it is clear that focusing solely on my A-level results would not reveal the full extent of my abilities. The period during which I undertook my A-levels coincided with the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, further compounding the difficulties I faced.

The rigid application of A-level requirements without context often discourages potential candidates like myself from applying for certain roles. Given a chance to explain my circumstances, I believe employers would recognise my resilience, willingness to learn, and excellence in the subject. My journey through the BA and BSc programmes exemplifies these qualities and highlights the importance of understanding individual stories beyond surface-level qualifications.

Despite these challenges, living the "life of the mind" has been a rewarding journey. It is a life of constant questioning and relentless pursuit of understanding. It means embracing uncertainty and finding joy in the quest for answers. This intellectual lifestyle fosters resilience and adaptability, skills that are invaluable both within and beyond the confines of academia.

From my studies, I've obtained lessons both banal and profound. I've learned that markets are influenced just as much by what people believe as by actual facts. For example,

if people think a new product is exciting, they might buy it even if it's not very different from the old one. This idea goes beyond just economics and applies to many areas of life. This insight into human behaviour will stay with me, influencing how I navigate the professional world and understand the actions of those around me. Moreover, the discipline has instilled in me a respect for data and evidence-based decision-making, a mindset that will undoubtedly shape my future ventures.

Pursuing a Bachelor of Science in Economics at the University of Essex has been a pivotal chapter in my academic story. This degree programme has offered a rich blend of theoretical knowledge and practical application, allowing me to delve into the complexities of economic theory while also engaging with real-world problems. One of the highlights of my time at Essex was my placement year at Samsung Electronics UK as a Smartphone Product Management Associate. This role merged academic insights with hands-on experience, enhancing my understanding of market strategies and consumer behaviour through launching major products and presenting to key partners. Additionally, presenting my dissertation at the Annual Student Conference 2024 showcased my ability to communicate complex ideas effectively. These experiences show the real-world application of economic principles and the importance of interdisciplinary knowledge in addressing market dynamics.

Looking ahead, I am excited to further my studies at the London School of Economics, where I will pursue a Masters in the Psychology of Economic Life. This advanced study will allow me to delve deeper into the psychological underpinnings of economic behaviour, blending my passion for economics with a nuanced understanding of human psychology.

As I stand on the cusp of this new chapter, I am filled with a sense of anticipation and excitement. The journey through economics has been one of discovery and growth, and the road ahead promises even greater opportunities for learning and exploration. With each step, I am reminded of the profound impact that the love of learning has on shaping our perspectives and guiding our paths.

In conclusion, my journey through the world of economics has been full of discovery and introspection. It has led me down intellectual rabbit holes that have broadened my understanding and deepened my appreciation for the complexity of human behaviour and market forces. Despite the challenges and occasional frustrations, the unique charm of this discipline and the lessons it imparts make it a field worth exploring, one that forever changes the way we see the world. The pursuit of knowledge, much like life itself, is an ever-evolving journey, one that I am honoured to continue with an unyielding curiosity and a steadfast commitment to understanding the complexities of our world.

Phoebe Ng

our resilient procrastinor

Does ‘doing what you love’ matter anymore when choosing a degree?

Often the key piece of advice for students applying to university is to “do what you love”; if you can demonstrate a genuine passion for your subject, you will receive an offer and be able to make the most out of university. But if your love lies with the arts or humanities, what happens next? As the government condemns “mickey mouse degrees”, and there is increasing preoccupation with financial and career prospects for graduates in the face of the cost-of-living crisis, should love for your subject remain a key consideration?

Undertaking a degree is a serious decision, committing yourself to years of hard work and thousands of pounds of debt, therefore many students choose the subject they love, hoping to achieve the most enjoyable experience possible. However, when I was applying for university in 2022 it seemed that more and more of my peers were justifying their degree choices with arguments such as: “once I graduate, I will be paid well” and “I’ll definitely get a job at the end.”

Degrees which are generalised to have less financially lucrative and stable career outcomes are not characterised as a ‘sensible decision’. Rankings of the degrees with ‘the best

arning potential' and calculators to find out which degree will earn you the highest salary are marketed to students to encourage career prospects to become the primary factor in the choice of degrees. Students cannot be blamed for their decision to focus on financial stability over passion when the cost-of-living crisis threatens quality of life in the UK. Instead of encouraging young people to stay true to their passions and allow universities to be a place where students can learn what they love, there is a seeming obsession with concepts such as 'employability' and vocational skills, which overwhelmingly overlook the value of arts and humanities degrees.

This leads to underfunding of arts and humanities subjects and grants, and the cutting of courses at UK universities. This point of view may have played a part in the positioning of MIT and Imperial College London in the 2025 QS World University Rankings, with these two STEM focused institutions taking the top spots.

In addition to these practical elements, perceptions of the arts and humanities are also shaped so that students are forced to validate passion with financial prospects and defend their love for their degrees. Courses which apparently "don't deliver outcomes people deserve" are mockingly called "Mickey Mouse degrees" by the conservatives, and education secretary Gillian Keagan wishes to cut them and encourage apprenticeships instead.

This undermines the value of a degree in arts and humanities, branding it as useless, or at least less valuable than vocational and STEM degrees. While this valuation is false, (Ryan Coogan explains the merits of a degree in humanities (The Independent 2024)) it leads to arts and humanities students' love for their subject being belittled and criticised for being impractical and pointless.

This is accompanied by a social phenomenon, as my group of arts-and-humanities-studying-friends regularly joke about our concerns for our future prospects and compete for unpaid writing experience while our peers are excited to attend paid business and finance internships in London. This concern for the lack of support for arts and humanities does not negate genuine love and passion for our degrees, however it can sometimes dampen enthusiasm.

Despite this, as a Classics and English student who has often been asked “What will you even do with that degree?” I wouldn't trade my degree course for anything, as my love for my subject makes 9am classes and long essays so much more bearable - being able to dedicate my time to what I love even slightly reduces my bitterness at student debt. The majority of time at university is spent learning, reading and writing, and it would be difficult to commit to this enough to be successful if I did not enjoy the process, despite some worries for what will happen after my time in education is over.

Every year students choose to study the subjects they love, regardless of criticism and social valuing of STEM degrees. To endure discouragement from multiple directions and continue to study what you love (if it is not considered a ‘useful’ degree) demonstrates a bravery and a genuine passion for a subject, which should be encouraged and rewarded, not met with patronization and warnings. Even if a degree is not projected to earn the most, no degree undertaken out of love and passion is wasteful or useless, a message which must be communicated to uncertain 16-year-old arts and humanities lovers who are considering their university applications now.

Willow Lock

our Kernewek Latinist

For Icarus

Artists are like Icarus
We'd rather fly and fall.

Some

touched by the sky, are remembered

Most never escape the labyrinth
Or fell *just* outside its borders

Joining.

The sea of anonymous wax and feathers

In its waters nothing grows
Save corals made of concrete

My hometown graves that never rest
All souls sinking and swimming

Cylin Wang
Our Messenger in a Bottle

This is just to say...

Not that I ate the plums in the icebox, as William Carlos Williams did, but that every essay here remains the intellectual property of its writer.

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think deeper.