

Book Review Response 【書評回應】

## Back to the Future: A Response to Stephan Schmidt<sup>§</sup>

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As you might have learned from your high school debating coach, a winning strategy in that sort of an exercise is to buckle your opponent into an awkward and vulnerable position by putting his view in the worst possible light so that your own ideas might shine with all their elegance and brilliance. That surely sounds good, but it has this drawback: real debate doesn't work that way. You cannot assume that your opponent will not bounce back and set the record straight. In reading Stephan Schmidt's review published in the December 2010 issue of *Taiwan Journal of East Asian Studies* (vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 361-372), the idea of that failing strategy kept popping up in my mind. The book Schmidt reviewed, *Humanism in Intercultural Perspective: Experiences and Expectations*, is a collection of essays edited by Jörn Rüsen and Henner Laass, and published by Transcript in 2009 as one of the volumes in the Humanism in the Age of Globalization series. Schmidt dismissed that book too quickly to make any serious argument or impression, and as he singled out my contribution to that book as "the programmatic essay" and commented on it in several places, I believe a response is in order.

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§ This article is a response to the review commentary of the book *Humanism in Intercultural Perspective: Experiences and Expectations* written by Dr. Stephan Schmidt on vol. 7 no. 2 of *Taiwan Journal of East Asian Studies*.

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The edited volume Schmidt reviewed is closely related to a research project that aims to reclaim humanism from the wreckage of its political and ideological critique. In the last few decades, humanism has been severely criticized for its alleged human arrogance, secular hubris, and most damagingly, its Eurocentric pretentiousness. In a sweeping condemnation of history before the postmodern age, it is even indicted for all the ills of modernity, including Nazism (a point I shall come to discuss later). And yet, for those who still believe in the values of humanity, who are not yet ready to give up human rights and human dignity despite the trendy idea of *la fin de l'homme*, humanism needs to be reexamined and reclaimed, and an important step towards that goal is to rethink humanism beyond the scope of Europe and North America, hence the title of the volume: *Humanism in Intercultural Perspective*. If humanism in its European context has indeed been tainted with all sorts of problems, defects, and failures, to rethink humanism afresh from the perspectives of other and non-European cultures may, it is hoped, offer some lessons and insights to reformulate a set of ideas that will avoid old mistakes and past pitfalls. To reclaim humanism is a newly established research project to tackle a huge problem, and the first step taken is certainly a modest one—a conference to start talking about the desirability of humanism reexamined from not only European, but also, and particularly, non-European perspectives. The collection of essays is based on presentations at that conference held in Essen, Germany in 2006, and more volumes are to follow (and have since followed) to gradually build up momentum and move towards a new kind of discourse on humanism for our time, a humanism that is new as it is different from the old Eurocentric idea, and intercultural as it tries to include perspectives and values from different cultures and traditions.

As a participant in the conference on humanism and in full agreement with the goal of the research project, I have never underestimated the challenges and difficulties of the project, and I do not believe that Professor Rösen or any of the other contributors to the volume has the unrealistic belief that we, simply by publishing our presentations, are going to shake up the world—even the small

intellectual circles of the academic world—and change everybody's mind about humanism overnight. The project is ongoing precisely because no one expects a sudden and immediate success, but it will take time to make the case by patiently arguing for the basic human values against all sorts of distortions, misunderstandings, and anti-humanist ideologies. Like every other intellectual endeavor, arguing for humanism means at the same time arguing against the abuse of humanism or distortion of what humanism in its basic sense purports to accomplish. In other words, the discourse of humanism has a critical function inherent in any intellectual endeavor, and it is not just what Schmidt describes contemptuously as a bunch of "statements of scholarly goodwill" (p. 365). Actually there is nothing wrong with "scholarly goodwill," because the alternative, in Schmidt's own words, "crushing each other's skull" (p. 369), is not an acceptable option. And yet, Schmidt does not seem to be interested in goodwill, for he is neither capable of appreciating the "statements of scholarly goodwill" in this volume, nor is he capable of showing any goodwill towards the volume and most of its contributors. His extremely negative review seems to reveal a peculiarly fractious, morose attitude towards "statements of goodwill." To be sure, he is "unsatisfied" not just with expressions of goodwill, but "goodwill coupled with rather little actual discussion and analysis" (p. 365). Here I seem to detect the shadowy figure of that gymnasium debating coach, because to describe the entire volume as nothing but empty wishes without any substance is an easy way to dismiss the whole book, but it is perhaps too easy and too quick to be effective.

My own "programmatic essay," for example, traces the intellectual history of humanism back to its Renaissance beginnings and its development in the Enlightenment and modern times, with discussions not only of the famous humanist Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, but also of humanism's critics, particularly Foucault and Derrida and their idea of the End of Man, also with analysis of the causes of the demise of humanism, e.g., the devastation of the World Wars, the evil of imperialism and colonialism, economic crisis and political corruption, the destruction of the earth's ecosystem, the huge gap

between the superrich and the terribly poor, and what I see as the fallacy of a Manichaeian opposition, the tendency to go to extremes in conceptualizing the human either as godly or as worse than the worst, the absolutist All or Nothing. It is in this context that I present both the Confucian and the Taoist views on how best to live one's life, and I argue that despite their differences, both the Confucians and the Taoists maintain that human beings must live their lives based on their own moral understanding of their relationships with the world, not counting on gods or a Savior to take the burden off their shoulders. Schmidt may not like my argument, but I don't see how he can ignore all these as not "actual discussion and analysis." What he did was simply to turn a blind eye to what I presented in my essay as though all my discussion and analysis did not exist. Indeed, in his not very subtle debating strategy, Schmidt seems prone to suppress or misrepresent what other people have actually said in order to make his case easier. For example, he quoted me as saying, "we need to go back to reexamine the different concepts of humanity in both East and West and study their original intended meanings, rather than their distortions in later time," and immediately criticizes this as "cultural conservatism and hermeneutic naivety" (p. 365). And yet, he did not quote my earlier argument against a simple return to the past when I asked: "Is it possible for the modern world to undo centuries of human history and revert back to the medieval world, which was hardly everybody's paradise, or to the medieval time when everyday life was, even as John Carroll describes it, 'a miserable struggle to survive,' 'cursed by endemic warfare, famine, disease,' and by horrible plagues that wiped out 'entire cities'?" Schmidt suppressed these words because they do not help him to paint me in the sickly colors of "cultural conservatism" and "hermeneutic naivety." But it is truly naive to believe that any call to reclaim a past idea against its "distortions in later time" is guilty of "cultural conservatism." Does Schmidt really believe that history is a process of steady progress and perfect unfolding of social and political ideas, that no distortion or misinterpretation ever happens, and that there is never any need to redress the abuse of an idea? The fact that I have just pointed out his suppression

of my own words is a case in point. You cannot selectively quote people's words out of context and misrepresent their views, and at the same time deny there is any need or possibility to correct the distortion. Real debate doesn't work that way.

Schmidt admires "Dipesh Chakrabarty's insight into the impossibility of any such recourse to an undistorted past" (p. 365). According to Schmidt, then, history has always been a distortion of ideas and nothing can or should be done about it. Here is that Manichaeic dichotomy again: you either have a pristine, pure, and undistorted past, or you have nothing but total distortion of the past without any hope of recovery or recuperation. If that is true, then, historians, detectives, investigators, and practitioners of forensic science should all be out of work. I am not that pessimistic, however, and I locate human beings and the human condition somewhere between the extremes, and I believe that distortion, like so many other things in the human world, is a matter of degree. A pure, undistorted past may be something devoutly to be wished, and slight misunderstanding is perhaps unavoidable, but that does *not* mean that we should let gross misinterpretation and flagrant distortion go unchecked and never even try to get at the truth, however elusive that might be.

Here I would come to a point mentioned earlier, i.e., a rather bizarre distortion of the idea of humanism, in which humanism and Nazism somehow made the connection. In a book devoted to the very subject of humanism, Tony Davies begins the first chapter by describing a photo of a group of German soldiers in front of the Parthenon, taken on 27 April 1941, when they occupied Athens, with a flag flying above the occupied city bearing "the insignia of Adolf Hitler's thousand-year Reich, the iron cross and the swastika."<sup>1</sup> Those Nazi soldiers and officers, like most middle-class Germans, says Davies, were all "enthusiastic philhellenes."

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1 Tony Davies, *Humanism* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 8.

Had not the great Richard Wagner, Teutonic nationalist and anti-Semite, been acclaimed by his disciple Friedrich Nietzsche as the contemporary incarnation of the Hellenic spirit? Was not the very notion of the "Aryan" type, so central to the National Socialist doctrine of racial purity, borrowed from the work of the German philologists and hellenists of the previous century? Had not the Nazi philosopher Martin Heidegger only the other day hailed Greek civilisation as "the beginning of our spiritual-historical being," a destiny which "awaits us, as a distant command bidding us catch up with its greatness?" And as for the *Führer* himself, had he not declared that, amidst all the trash and filth produced by degenerate races through the ages, the only authentic artistic heritage was the Greco-German?<sup>2</sup>

The Germans loved Greece. "The Hellenic idea belonged, for Hegel and Humboldt as for Goethe and Schiller, not to the remote past and the post-mortem formalities of an ancient language, but to the future," says Davies. "For them, the modern Germany they were engaged in building, cultured, orderly and modern, would be the fruition of what the ancient Greeks had dreamed."<sup>3</sup> Just look at this breathtaking linkage and free association: all Germans (and Austrians, too, since the *Führer* was actually Austrian-born) loved Greece, therefore you can connect them all together, from Goethe and Schiller to Hegel and Humboldt, from Wagner and Nietzsche to Heidegger and the SS officers, and finally to Adolf Hitler himself. But how does the linkage work? And what has all this got to do with humanism? Well, Davies has got the answer: first, the word *Humanismus* is "of German coinage," and, second, "its credentials are Greek."<sup>4</sup> One may wonder, however, where does that German coinage come from: Isn't there a Latin word *humanitas* already used by Cicero in classical times, an Italian word *umanista* already used in the fifteenth century, and its equivalent English word

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2 Ibid., p. 9.

3 Ibid., p. 11.

4 Ibid., p. 9.

*humanist* already appeared in the late sixteenth century?<sup>5</sup> Even if the nineteenth-century German philologists and Hellenists coined the word *Humanismus*, and, before that, Johann Joachim Winckelmann in the eighteenth century already made Greek art the ideal manifestation of beauty, is loving Greece and Greek art the defining characteristic of a Nazi? Is there a significant line one can draw between Winckelmann, Goethe, even Nietzsche and Heidegger on the one hand, and Adolf Hitler on the other? As Germans, they all speak the German language, eat German bread, sauerkraut, probably Nuremberg sausage, and drink beer, but does that make them all Nazis? This is probably the most ridiculous line of argument based on wildest free associations I have ever seen, but that also illustrates the necessity to correct the distortion of the idea of humanism and to reclaim its legacy from a new and intercultural perspective. Hopefully Schmidt, being German himself, would have not much difficulty to see my point here.

And yet Schmidt would not like to see any recovery of humanism, and he thought the humanism project either futile or unnecessary, or both, because in his view, humanism is a discourse that will never "convince (anybody) of the benefits of participation," and it is doing nothing new and different from what "humanists have been engaging in for a long time and will continue to engage in for a long time to come" (p. 369). But he is wrong on both counts. First, the fact that Schmidt is not happy about the argument for humanism does not mean that all others are equally inimical to it. Whether the project to reclaim humanism will win over more audiences and convince them to participate remains to be seen, but to dismiss the effort before it gets started is premature and defeatist, to say the least. Second, if humanists are doing what they have been doing for a long time, that does not mean that nothing can or need be changed. Schmidt seems rather acquiescent in whatever has been going on and does not want to change a bit. People are different and cultural differences are never to be reconciled, the world is pretty much what it always is, and in any case we already have "the

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5 See Nicholas Mann, "The Origins of Humanism," in Jill Kraye (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 1.

Charta of the United Nations" (p. 368). For those of us who do not consider the current situation satisfying and would like to do something to change it, Schmidt's dismissal of the humanism project is just another indication of the kind of problem we have to face, the distorted view of humanism that needs to be remedied in the first place. There are of course other issues, for example, the very differently understood concepts of universalism and relativism, but this is not the place to define the terms and clarify the misunderstandings, as I have already discussed those terms in quite a few of my published writings.<sup>6</sup>

What I do want to give some further comments on is Schmidt's equating my call to "go back to reexamine the different concepts of humanity in both East and West" with "cultural conservatism." Perhaps here I should plead guilty of too ponderous a sense of history. This may well be a typical problem with many Chinese scholars who, living within a terribly long history and intellectual tradition, often "go back" to ancient philosophers for insights and advice that bear on contemporary issues. What Schmidt sees as "cultural conservatism," we may think of as drawing on our spiritual or intellectual resources. Besides, the "going back" might be far more complicated than a simple return, and its purpose is never purely antiquarian, but always with an eye to current issues and future enlightenment. The internal minute differences among ancient Chinese philosophers may have completely escaped Schmidt's necessarily superficial sweeping glimpse. Speaking of the Confucian tradition, Schmidt declares that "hardly anything in it is older than the *mauvaise foi* of scholars who claim to have caught Confucius' and Mencius' original intentions" (pp. 365-366). If Schmidt can read my Chinese publications, he may find my discussion precisely of that issue, namely the advocacy of one's own view by borrowing the words of an earlier authority and

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6 See Zhang Longxi, *Allegoresis: Reading Canonical Literature East and West* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005), *Unexpected Affinities: Reading across Cultures* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), and more recently, "The Complexity of Difference: Individual, Cultural and Cross-Cultural," *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*, vol. 35, no. 3-4 (2010), pp. 341-352.



twisting those words in the process.<sup>7</sup> But here again, the point is precisely that we can, through careful reading and meticulous research, differentiate the words of an earlier authority, say, Confucius, from the use or abuse of those words by later commentators. Here again, I consider it an important intellectual task to distinguish adequate understanding from willful misunderstanding, misinterpretation, and deliberate distortion. In other words, I think that we as scholars have a moral responsibility to expose and eliminate the *mauvaise foi* wherever we find it, while Schmidt considers such an effort futile and unnecessary. To correct distortions, however, we do need to go back to earlier philosophers and their ideas. If that appears "conservative" in the eyes of those who constantly live in the current supermodern or postmodern moment, so be it. I still believe that by "going back" to history and tradition, we may acquire something more substantial and reliable than the latest round of catwalk shows.

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7 See Zhang Longxi, "Speaking for the Sage: Reflections on Commentary and Manipulation 代聖人立言：談評注對經文的制約," *Sun Yat-sen Journal of Humanities* 中山人文學報, no. 15 (Kaohsiung: October, 2002), pp. 131-142.