



## Planned Obsolescence

*falling indelibly into the past*



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Kathleen Fitzpatrick in writing ⌚ 5 October 2016 ☰ 6,515 Words

# Generous Thinking: Introduction

The text below is a revised version of a talk I gave at the University of Richmond this spring. It's the first bit of writing toward my very much in-process project, *Generous Thinking: The University and the Public Good*. I suspect that a modified version of it will wind up serving as an introduction to the larger project, but I'm early enough in this thing that I wouldn't be surprised to be wrong about that entirely.

Responses are not simply welcome but strongly desired.

## Introduction

The argument that this project presents — and I will cop right here up front to the fact that this is an argument, hoping to persuade you of its rightness — begins for me with what has come to feel like an emblematic moment of university life. Some years ago, I gave my graduate seminar a recent article to read. I do not now remember what that article was, or even what it was about, but I do remember clearly that upon opening the discussion by asking for first impressions, three students in a row offered fairly merciless takedowns, pointing out the essay's critical failures and ideological blindspots, some of which were justified but at least a couple of which seemed, frankly, to have missed the

point. After the third such response, I interjected: “Okay, okay, I want to dig into all of that, but let’s back up a bit first. What’s the author’s argument? What’s her goal in the article? What does she want the reader to come away with?”

Silence.

I won’t rehash all of what ensued, but suffice it to say that it was a difficult moment. I was a lot younger and a fair bit less steady on my feet then, and my initial response to the silence was to start wondering whether I’d asked a stupid question, whether the sudden failure to meet my gaze was a sign that my students were now wondering how I’d ever gotten to this point in my career with such a pedestrian perspective, whether having asked them about the argument was tantamount to asking them what the author’s name was and where they might find it on the page, either so painfully obvious that they were mortified to find themselves being treated like high-school students or so apparently superficial that there must be deeper layers that they were missing. “It’s not a trick question,” I said, asking again for somebody to take a stab at summarizing the argument. It only gradually became clear to me that the question was not stupid or superficial but rather oddly unfamiliar, that everything in their educations to that point had prepared them for interrogating and unpacking, demystifying and subverting, all of the most important critical acts of reading against the grain, but too little emphasis had been placed on the acts of paying attention, of listening, of reading with rather than reading against.

Before this starts to sound like a complaint about the kids these days, let me present another emblematic moment, in the form of the discussion period concluding the vast majority of conference sessions. The frequent academic jokes involving phrases such as “this is less of a question than a comment” and “thank you for sharing your work; let me ask you about my work” might begin to indicate something about our dispositions in the act of engaging with the ideas of others, which is to say too often waiting for the next moment at which we can get our own ideas on the table.

This project is in large part about my desire to see universities and those who work in and around them — faculty members and administrators, in particular, but also staff members, students, parents, trustees, legislators, and the many other people who affect the futures of our institutions of higher education — cultivate a greater disposition toward listening, toward patience, toward engaging with what is actually in front of us rather than continually pressing forward to where we want to go. Most of what follows focuses on the faculty (and even more particularly on the humanities faculty), partially because of my own background and partially because of the extent to which the work done by the faculty

is the university: research and teaching are, at least in theory, the primary products of our institutions. But when I say that I hope to inspire a greater disposition toward listening in members of the faculty, I don't mean that we need to do a better job of listening to one another, though that certainly wouldn't hurt. Instead, in what follows, I am primarily focused on the ways that we as professors and scholars communicate with a range of broader publics about our work. And some focused thinking about the ways we communicate with those publics is in order, I would suggest, because many of our fields are facing crises that we cannot solve on our own.

These crises, I must acknowledge, are not life-threatening, not world-historical, not approaching the kind or degree of the highly volatile political situation we face both at home and in the world, living as we do at a moment in which the threat of international terrorism is being met with and matched by the renewal of nationalist politics and domestic terror; in which millions of people running for their lives are confused with and held responsible for the thing they're running from; in which many residents of our communities find themselves in grave danger posed by those sworn to serve and protect; in which the communications network once imagined to create a borderless utopia of rational collectivist actors feeds attacks on those who dare to criticize the manifestations of oppression within that network; in which the planet itself gives every sign not of nearing an ecological tipping point but, instead, of being well past it.

That, in the face of such a world, I am noodling about the importance of listening for the future of the university may appear self-indulgent and self-marginalizing, a head-in-the-sand retreat into the aesthetic (or worse, the academic) and an escape from the ugliness of the Real World. I hope, by the end of this project, to have made a case for why this is not so — why, in fact, the humanistic fields studied within our institutions of higher education have the potential to help us navigate the present crises, if not to solve them — and, not incidentally, why it would not be a waste of time for those of us who work in those fields to take a good hard look at ourselves and the ways that we engage with one another, in order to ensure that we're doing everything we possibly can to model the ways of being we'd like to see manifested in the world.

The study of literature, history, art, philosophy, and other forms of culture has been justly lauded by those whose business it is to teach those fields as a key means of providing students with a rich set of interpretive, critical, and ethical skills with which they can engage the world around them. These reading, thinking, and writing skills are increasingly necessary in today's hypermediated, globalized, conflict-filled world — and yet many of the humanities departments that teach them feel themselves increasingly

marginalized within their own institutions. This marginalization is related, if not directly attributable, to the degree to which students, parents, administrators, trustees, politicians, the media, and the public at large have been led in a self-reinforcing cycle to believe that the skills our fields provide are a luxury in the current economic environment: Someone particularly visible makes a publicly disparaging remark about what a student is going to do with that art-history degree; commentators reinforce the sense that humanities majors are worth less than pre-professional degrees with the presumption of clearly defined career paths; parents strongly encourage their students to turn toward fields that seem more pragmatic in such economically uncertain times, fields that seem somehow to describe a job; administrators note a decline in humanities majors and cut budgets and positions; the jobs crisis for humanities PhDs worsens; the media notices; someone particularly visible makes a publicly disparaging remark about what all those adjuncts were planning on doing with that humanities PhD anyhow; and the whole thing intensifies. In many institutions, this draining away of majors and faculty and resources has reduced the humanities to a means of ensuring that students studying to become scientists and bankers are reminded of the human ends of their work. This is not a terrible thing in and of itself — David Silbersweig recently wrote compellingly in the *Washington Post* about the importance that his undergraduate philosophy major has had for his career as a neuroscientist — but it is not a sufficient ground on which humanities fields can thrive as fields, with their own majors, their own research problems, and their own values and goals.

And it is not, of course, the sort of problem that we hear much about in the sciences. Though conflicts periodically emerge around the need to preserve and protect basic research in an era driven by more applied, capitalizable outcomes, the world at large nonetheless mostly understands that such research, and the kinds of study that support it, are crucial to the general advancement of knowledge. The purposes of basic research in the humanities, however, often feel a bit more hidden from view, as do the purposes of learning in those fields. And so we have seen over the last several years a welter of defenses of the humanities, each of which seems slightly more defensive than the last. Calls to save the humanities issued by public figures often leave scholars dissatisfied, as they frequently begin with an undertheorized and perhaps even somewhat retrograde sense of what we do and why, and thus frequently give the sense of trying to save our fields from us. (I might here gesture toward a recent column published by the former chairman of the NEH, Bruce Cole, entitled “What’s Wrong with the Humanities?”, which begins memorably: “Let’s face it: Too many humanities scholars are alienating students and the public with their opacity, triviality, and irrelevance.”) But perhaps even worse is the degree to which professors themselves — those best positioned to make the case on

behalf of the humanities in general, or literary studies in particular — have failed to find traction with their arguments. As the unsuccessful defenses proliferate, the public view of the humanities becomes all the worse, leading Simon During to grumble that “Whatever things the humanities do well, it is beginning to look as if promoting themselves is not among them.” (And maybe we like it that way, on some level; self-promotion is not something to which we aspire, and the pleasures of the obscure are well-known to hipsters everywhere.)

Perhaps this is a good moment for us to stop and consider what it is that the humanities do do well, what the humanities are for. Let us start with a basic definition of the humanities as a cluster of fields that focus on the careful study and analysis of cultures and their many modes of thought and forms of representation — writing, music, art, media, and so on — as they have developed and moved through time and across geographical boundaries, growing out of and adding to our senses of who we are as individuals, as groups, and as nations. The humanities are interested, then, in the ways that representations work, in the relationships between representations and social structures, in all the ways that human ideas and their expression shape and are shaped by human culture. In this definition we might begin to see the possibility that studying literature or art or film might not be solely about the object itself, but instead about a way of engaging with the world: in the process one develops the ability to read and interpret what one sees and hears, the insight to understand the multiple layers of what is being communicated and why, and the capacity to put together for oneself an appropriate, thoughtful contribution.

Now, the first thing to note about this definition is that I am certain that some of the humanities scholars who read it are going to disagree with it — they will have nuances and correctives to offer — and it is important to understand that this disagreement does not necessarily mean that my definition is wrong. Nor do I mean to suggest that the nuances and correctives presented would be wrong. Rather, that disagreement is what we do: we hear one another’s interpretations (of texts, of performances, of historical events) and we push back against them. We advance the work in our field through disagreement and revision. And this agonistic approach, I want to argue today, is both the greatest strength of the humanities—and of the university in general—and its Achilles’ heel. I’ll unpack this thought further as I proceed.

For the moment, though, back to Simon During and his sense that the humanities are terrible at self-promotion. During’s complaint, levied at the essays included in Peter Brooks and Hilary Jewitt’s volume, *The Humanities and Public Life*, is largely that, in the

act of self-defense, humanities scholars leave behind doing what they do and instead “sermonize” (his word) about the value of what they do. His conclusion seems to be that the turn outward is part of the problem, that it is simply the nature of things that the humanities “form a world more than they provide a social good,” and that making the case for ourselves and our fields in “more modest terms” may help us direct that case to “those who matter most in this context.” In part, Derrida’s interest in asking the humanities to stop defending themselves is tied to his sense of the field — or at least what he refers to as the “core humanities,” which I take to mean the study of the canon within the long-established fields of English, history, philosophy, and the like — as intimately implicated in maintaining rather than disrupting social hierarchies. His argument appears in the end to be that we need to make it possible for students who do not already occupy a position of financial comfort to study the humanities — to keep our fields from being relegated to the position of luxury goods — but somehow to do so without arguing for public support, or for the public significance that might engender such support.

This resistance to a serious consideration of the university’s relationship to the public — both the public purposes that it might serve and the public support that it desperately requires — has something to do with a lingering bit of discomfort that even practitioners of those fields have with the notion of the humanities and its relationship to humanism, a discomfort that creates grave difficulties in making a publicly appreciable case for ourselves and our work. That discomfort stems from the degree to which humanism’s triumphant belief in the power of human reason and the humanities’ study of what Matthew Arnold so blithely but searingly referred to as “the best that has been thought and said” have together long been used as a means of solidifying and perpetuating the social order, with all its hierarchies and exclusions. Those of us whose work focuses on Derrida’s “core humanities” are often understandably queasy about our fields’ development out of the projects of nationalism and cultural dominance, and are left leery about stating clearly and passionately the values and goals that we bring to our work. And our preferred strategy for contending with such ambivalence is to complicate; to demonstrate from a rigorously theorized position the ways that we are engaged in a progressive, if not radical, project; to read, as they say, against the grain.

This form of complication is utterly necessary, not just to our methodologies but to our sense of ourselves in the act of our work: it is clear that the disciplinary force wielded by our fields has too often been put to dangerous use, and it is necessary to account for the subtleties of our positions. Our work thus repeatedly explores, as Rita Felski describes it, our suspicious “conviction” that not only the texts that we study but also the ways that we have been led to study them are “up to no good” (58). This is where my graduate students

began their engagement with that article. The problem is not just that they were then unable to articulate in any positive sense what the article was actually trying to accomplish, but that the critical position they assumed was the only position they had available to them. And however much this internally-focused mode of critique has done to advance the field and its social commitments — and I will stipulate that it has done a lot — this form of engagement is too often illegible to the many readers around us, including students, parents, administrators, and policymakers. What they see looks like discomfort with the field in which we work, ambivalence about the materials we study, resistance to the culture in which we live, and a seemingly endless series of internal arguments, all of which might well lead them to ask what is to be gained from supporting a field that seems intent on self-dismantling.

Worse, perhaps, it has provided an inroad into higher education for some forces that are hastening that dismantling. Bill Readings, in *The University in Ruins*, powerfully traces the transition of the purposes of higher education from the propagation of the culture of the nation-state and the inculcation of its citizens therein, through an important period of resistance and protest, to its current role, which seems to be the production of value (both intellectual and human) for global capital. This is to say, again, that many of our suspicions about the goals of our institutions of higher learning as they were established are correct: they were developed in order to cultivate a particular model of citizenship based on exclusion and oppression and focused on the reproduction of state power. The problem is that without those goals, the purpose of higher education has drifted, and not in the ways we would have hoped: as in so many other areas of the contemporary public world, where the state has lost centrality and certainty, corporate interests have interceded; we may no longer promote exclusion and oppression in training state citizens, but we reconstitute it in a new guise when we turn, however inadvertently, to training corporate citizens. Even worse, rejecting or critiquing that purpose is simply not working: capital is extraordinarily able to absorb that critique and to marginalize those who make it. Perhaps we might have reached, as Felski's title suggests, the limits of critique; perhaps we might need to adopt a new mode of approach in order to make a dent in the systems that hem us in.

Of course, the critical approach is at the heart of what we scholars do, and we would be justified in bristling against any suggestion that we abandon it (or abandon the social commitments that underwrite it), particularly in favor of an approach that might be more, as the kids would say, "relatable." Why is it, we might reasonably ask, that no one feels any qualms about suggesting that literary studies be conducted in an easily comprehensible, jargon-free, friendly and appreciable fashion, but no one suggests this

about high-energy physics? We take this resistance to difficulty in the humanities, whether of language or of argument, as a sign of dismissal, of a refusal to take us and our work seriously. I want to suggest, however, that though such dismissal may very well be behind the calls for comprehensibility in our field — see again Bruce Cole — it is not the only thing back there. These calls may be at least in part a sign of the degree to which people care about our subject matter, or might be led to care, the degree to which they feel the cultures we study to be their own, leading them to want (on whatever conscious or unconscious level) to understand what it is that we're up to. And I also want to suggest that we have the opportunity, if we take that care seriously, to create a kind of dialogue that might help further rather than stymie the work we want to do.

Some of my thinking about ways that attention to such care might encourage scholars to approach the work that we do from a slightly different perspective has developed out of a talk I heard a couple of years ago by David Scobey, then the dean of the New School for Public Engagement. His suggestion was that scholarly work in the humanities is in a kind of imbalance, that critical thinking has dominated at the expense of a more socially-directed mode of what he called “generous thinking,” and that a recalibration of the balance between the two might enable us to make possible a greater public commitment in our work, which in turn might inspire a greater public commitment to our work. I want, humanities scholar that I am, to revise this model slightly, by nudging us away from the notion that critical thinking and generous thinking are somehow opposed categories, in tension with one another, pulling us in different directions and requiring us to walk the tightrope between. Instead, I want to think about how these two modes of thought might be more fruitfully intertwined. What kinds of discussions might be possible — discussions among ourselves, discussions with our students, but also discussions with a much broader series of publics, with those whose support we require in order to keep doing the work we do — what such discussions might be possible if we understood the very foundation of our critical thinking practices to be generosity?

What is it I mean when I talk about generosity in this context? I don't mean the term to refer to “giving” in any material sense, or even in any simple metaphorical sense. It doesn't necessarily indicate that we should all be doing more volunteer work, or that we need to be more willing to overlook the flaws in reasoning of those with whom we disagree. Instead, what I'm hoping to develop, in myself most of all, is a kind of generosity of mind, by which I mean to indicate an openness to possibility. That openness begins for me by cultivating a listening presence, which is to say a conversational disposition that is not merely waiting for my next opportunity to speak but instead genuinely hearing and processing what is being said to me, underwritten by the conviction that in any given

exchange I likely have less to teach than I have to learn. It also means working to think *with* rather than *against*, whether the objects of those prepositions are texts or people. It means, as Lisa Rhody has explored in a brilliant blog post on the applicability of improvisational comedy's "rule of agreement" to academic life, adopting a mode of exchange that begins with *yes* rather than *no*: as she describes it, among colleagues, the rule of agreement functions as "a momentary staving off of the impulse to assume that someone else's scholarship is fashioned out of ignorance or apathy or even ill will or that the conversation was initiated in bad faith. Agreement doesn't have to be about value: it's not even about accuracy or support. The Rule of Agreement is a social contract to respect the intellectual work of your peers." That *yes* creates the possibility for genuine dialogue, not only with our colleagues but with our objects of study, our predecessors, and the many potential publics that surround us. *Yes* is the beginning of *yes*, *and*, or the capacity to work together to build something entirely new.

This mode of generous thinking is clearly instantiated, as Scobey's talk suggests, in many projects that focus on fostering public engagement in and through the work done within the university, including that of groups like *Imagining America*, which serves to connect academics, artists, and community organizations in ways that can surface and support their mutual goals for change. And yes, public projects like these are already taking place on many campuses around the country and in many fields across the curriculum. But one key aspect of understanding generosity as the ground from which scholarly work can and should grow is the requirement that we take such public projects just as seriously as the more traditional forms of critical work that circulate amongst ourselves. Scholars working in public history, just as one example, are likely to have some important stories to tell about the difficulties they have faced in getting work in that field appropriately evaluated and credited as work. And a few years ago, after a talk in which a well-respected scholar discussed the broadening possibilities that should be made available for humanities PhDs to have productive and fulfilling careers outside the classroom, including in the public humanities, I overheard a senior academic say with some bemusement, "I take the point, but I don't think it works in all fields. There's long been a 'public history.' But can you imagine a 'public literary criticism'?" His interlocutor chortled bemusedly: the very idea. But why not public literary criticism? What of the many public reading projects and literary publications that reach out to non-specialist audiences and engage them in the kinds of interpretation and analysis that we profess?

Our resistance to taking such public projects as seriously as we do the work we do for one another speaks to one of two things: first, our anxieties (and very real anxieties) about deprofessionalization, about association with the amateur, to which I'll return in a bit;

and second, to our continued (and I would argue profoundly misguided) division and ordering of the various categories to which our labor as academics is committed, with a completely distinct category called “service” almost inevitably coming in a distant third behind research and teaching. Grounding our work in a spirit of generosity might lead us to erase some of the boundaries between the work that we do to support the engagements of readers and instructors both inside and outside the academy, and the work that we consider to be genuinely “scholarly,” to consider ways that all of our work might have a spirit of service as its foundation. A proper valuation of public engagement in scholarly life, however, will require a systemic rethinking of the role that prestige plays in the academic reward system — and this, as I’ll discuss later in the project, is no small task. It is, however, crucial to a renewed understanding of the relationship between the university and the common good.

Similarly, grounding our work in generous thinking might not only encourage us to adopt a position of greater dialogic openness, and might not only foster projects that are more publicly engaged, but it might also lead us to place a greater emphasis on — and to attribute a greater value to — collaboration in academic life. It might encourage us to support and value various means of working in the open, of sharing our writing at more and earlier stages in the process of its development, and of making the results of our research more readily accessible to and usable by more readers. Critical thinking often presupposes a deep knowledge of a subject, not just on the part of the speaker but of the listener as well. Generous, generative modes of thinking invite non-experts into the discussion, bringing them along in the process of discovery.

But I want to acknowledge that adopting a mode of generous thinking is a task that is simultaneously extremely difficult and easily dismissible. We are accustomed to a mode of thought that rebuts, that questions, that complicates, and the kinds of listening and openness for which I am here advocating may well be taken as acceding to a form of cultural naïveté at best, or worse, a politically regressive knuckling-under to the pressures of neoliberal ideologies and institutions. This is the sense in which Rita Felski suggests that scholars have internalized “the assumption that whatever is *not* critical must therefore be *uncritical*” (9). Felski posits, in contrast to the most common assumptions within the field today, that the critical is not a project but instead a mood, a mode of self-performance, an affect — and one to which we have limited ourselves at great cost. What might be possible if we were to retain the social commitment that motivates our criticism while nonetheless opening ourselves and our work to its many potential moods and modes, including curiosity, appreciation, and perhaps even the difficult modes of empathy and love?

Such an opening would require us to place ourselves in a new relationship to our objects of study and their many audiences; we would need to be prepared to listen to what they have to tell us, to ask questions that are designed to elicit more about their interests than about ours. That is to say, we would need to open ourselves to the possibility that our ideas might turn out to be wrong. This, it may not surprise you to hear, is an alarming possibility not just for most scholars but, as Kathryn Schulz has explored, for most human beings in general to countenance, and one that we will go to extraordinary lengths to avoid facing. But given the ways in which arguments in our fields proceed, and given what Schulz has called the “Pessimistic Meta-Induction from the History of Everything,” it is all but certain that at some future moment our own blind spots, biases, and points of general ignorance will have been uncovered. Refusing to countenance the possibility of this wrongness makes it all but inevitable, but perhaps keeping it in view might open us to some new possibilities. If everything we write today already bears within it a future anterior in which it will have been demonstrated to be wrong-headed, there opens up the opportunity to explore a new path, one along which we develop not just a form of critical audacity but also a kind of critical humility.

The use of this critical humility, in which we acknowledge the possibility that we might not always be right, is in no small part the space it creates for genuinely listening to the ideas that others present, really considering their possibilities even when they contradict our own thoughts on the matter. But critical humility, as you might guess, is neither selected for nor encouraged in the profession, and it is certainly not cultivated in grad school. Quite the opposite, at least in my experience: everything in the environment of, for example, the seminar room makes flirting with being wrong unthinkable. And the only way to ensure one’s own fundamental rightness seems to be to demonstrate the flaws in all the alternatives. This is the method in which my grad students were trained, a mode of reading that encourages a leap from encountering an idea to countering it, without taking the time in between to really explore it. It’s that exploration that a real critical humility can open up: the time to discover what we might learn if we are allowed to let go, just a tiny bit, of our investment in being right.

This is not the only area of discomfort that foregrounding generosity in our thinking might create for us, however. Opening ourselves to the many potential moods that our work can manifest requires being willing to admit the sphere of the emotions into that work, not just from a position of critical or analytical distance but in an up close, affective manner. We worry, and with good reason, about the degree to which our emotions can be manipulated by the culture we study, obscuring what’s really happening — the emotional, after all, is the primary terrain on which advertising operates, undermining and

persuading and appealing and then erasing its traces as it goes. I want to suggest that it might be good for us as scholars to reclaim and recover the emotions for our more socially committed purposes, but I have to acknowledge the difficulties involved in doing so. Empathy, for instance, too easily slides into a self-congratulatory appropriation of the experience and feelings of the other. As I hope that many of us have learned from movements like Black Lives Matter and from the protests taking place on our campuses, what many have long known: the most difficult work of the ally may well be in adopting a position of listening in a mode that does not presume to know but that seeks instead to put the self aside in the hope of possible understanding. Genuine empathy, that is to say, is not a feel-good emotion, but an often painful, failure-filled process of what Dominick LaCapra has referred to as “empathic unsettlement,” in which we are continually called not just to feel for but to simultaneously acknowledge the irreconcilable otherness of the other, seeking to fully apprehend difference without tamping it down into bland “understanding.” This kind of ethical engagement, which can be enacted with texts as well as with communities, can be a hallmark of the humanities, if we open ourselves to permit a thorough consideration of affect and of the role that complex forms of identification might play in the work that we do.

As challenging as empathy, if in a different register, is love: love for our work, love for our subject matter, love for one another in the act of sharing what we have learned. That challenge is typified, perhaps, in our adviserly reactions to the graduate school admissions essay draft in which our student recalls with heartfelt sincerity the love of reading they have carried with them since childhood. We steer them away from such naïveté and toward more serious, future-oriented, critical purposes, and with good reason: we know how such an essay would be read. But what might be opened up for us as a field if that position of loving the materials with which we work did not have to be submerged or discarded? To ask us to open ourselves to the possibilities that love might present if it were to ground our work is not to take us back to some belletristic moment in which our energies are spent acting out our aesthetic appreciation or, worse, emoting over the text; there is still serious analytical work to be done, even if we allow ourselves to express the passion that our subject matter inspires. But we must also encounter in so doing that some of our anxieties about stepping back from the critical mood arise out of a worry that what we do will be perceived as purely affective or inspirational, unworthy of being supported as a serious form of research. We worry, as Deidre Lynch has explored, that genuinely loving something turns one into an amateur in the literal sense of the word: one so devoted to a practice that one ought to be willing to do it for free. We have good cause to fear deprofessionalization in the current higher education climate: in early 2016, as just one example, the governor of Kentucky rolled out a state budget that

included significant cuts for higher education in the state, but announced that those cuts would be differentially distributed. According to the governor, “there will be more incentives to electrical engineers than to French literature majors.... All the people in the world that want to study French literature can do so, they are just not going to be subsidized by the taxpayer like engineers.” This is the danger of the vocation: feeling called to a way of life, and particularly to a way of life in service to the public good, one had best be self-supporting. (Ask public school teachers.)

But is it possible — and the flurry that follows should be taken as a series of genuinely open rather than rhetorical questions — is it possible for us, or at least that diminishing percentage of us who are fully-employed scholars with tenure, to create space not just for our fields but for others who work at the nexus of the cultural and the social, to argue persuasively on behalf of the value of a caring engagement with community, of a sense of service to that community, while refusing to allow our institutions, our administrations, and our governments to lose sight of the fact that such service is work? What kinds of public support for our institutions might we be able to generate if we were to argue that public projects that promote the love of reading (or the love of art, or the love of history) exist in consonance with the work that we do in the classroom, or in the writing we do for one another, and that we should therefore take participation in such projects seriously? What might we be able to gain for our work if we were to approach those projects and the many kinds of readers they engage from a position of listening, really trying to hear their sense of what the materials we study offer them and how they are put to use in their lives? What would it mean to ask ourselves to begin by reading *with* them, rather than by correcting or instructing? What new purposes for the university might we imagine if we understand our role in it to be not inculcating state citizens, nor training corporate citizens, but instead facilitating the development of a diverse, open, community—both inside the classroom and outside it—encouraged to think together, to be involved in the ongoing project of how we understand and shape our cultures?

All of these possibilities that we open up — engaging perspectives other than our own, valuing and evaluating the productions and manifestations of our multiplicitous culture, encountering the other in all its irreducible otherness — are the best of what the humanities offer to the university, and the university to the world, and we must allow them to teach us just as much as we teach others. And all of these possibilities begin with cultivating the ability to think generously, to listen — to the text, to our communities, to ourselves — without attaching or rejecting. I have much more to say, obviously — there are chapters of it ahead — but this listening presence, in which I am willing to

countenance without judgment or shame the possibility that I just might be wrong, is where I will hope to leave myself in the end, ready to listen to you.

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## 40 thoughts on “Generous Thinking: Introduction”

**Kathleen Fitzpatrick (@kfitz)**

5 October 2016 at 9.34 am

This morning, the first bit of Generous Thinking. Comments very much desired.

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5 October 2016 at 10.35 am

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**Martin Hughes (@universityboy)**

6 October 2016 at 4.42 am

Generous Thinking: The University and the Public Good (@kfitz)  
<https://t.co/56ZNYaNM6H> and <https://t.co/SU8VngPZ28>

↳ Reply



**bibliotecaria**

6 October 2016 at 2.29 pm

An interesting contemplation, and one that is not completely new to me. In other contexts, the concept of “charitable listening” is an old one that has to recur regularly, because people forget and become critical. Especially when they become passionate about a subject.

But a few thoughts occur to me: first, when people engage critically with a topic before completely understanding, how can they do so properly? It seems to me that comprehension of an article is necessary BEFORE you can critique it properly, which means somewhere there has been a failure not just in charitable listening, but in teaching the proper way to DO critical thinking.

Second, it seems to me that when you note the state’s involvement in liberal arts, you are not going back far enough. Liberal arts as a concept began farther back in time, when most of the universities were religious institutions, and the goal of the liberal arts was to make one a better person. Of course, because they were religious institutions, their concept of a better person was within the context of the religion, but the basic idea seems to be truer to what liberal arts is for than what state indoctrination would suggest. To me, the idea of liberal arts has always been to define what is a good

person and then help you see how to get there, using critical thinking as one of the primary tools for that process. Indeed, I use those basic skills within my faith as much as within my work.

Anyway, I find your ideas most intriguing, and I would certainly agree that the humanities could benefit from it!

↳ Reply



**@AbiLemak**

6 October 2016 at 3.39 pm

reading and loving Kathleen Fitzpatrick's thoughts on what she calls "Generous Thinking" <https://t.co/mqrBEdu1ZT>

↳ Reply



**@mfgaede**

7 October 2016 at 9.48 pm

Generous Thinking: Introduction – Planned Obsolescence <https://t.co/p2WMIbSgo3>

↳ Reply



**MalovaRomanovaChernyshova**

16 October 2016 at 2.30 pm

Discussion mater veritas est – Thought thrives on conflict. This is an ancient statement, which is at the basis of scientific research so far. Art of the dispute, identification of weaknesses in opponent's argument and the desire to prove the truth of your judgment is an integral feature of many researchers. In fact, that is kind of an extension of their passion for learning and the expansion of human knowledge. However, it should be noted that for the Humanities this approach might be baneful and defamatory. Is there a mathematical precision of the evidence in literature or philosophy, for which a dispute has to be ended only after the revelation of the indisputable truth? Can we try to bring the relevant empirical basis to some rather abstract phenomena, which are the focus of the humanities? Can we try to establish the

only true causal relationships between those objects, even the definition of which is vague and debatable? Where can we find the origin of the crisis with the modern Humanities? Perhaps, the prevailing pragmatic approach in modern society stems from the opposition in which the Humanities have been for centuries – a long-term opposition between generous and critical thinking. A passionate desire to prove your rightness, to disclose opponent's weaknesses can easily overshadow the goals of understanding the multifaceted human culture. The Humanitarian knowledge, which does not meet the multifaceted diversity of societal needs, turns to be an alienated marginalized sphere. It can be compared with a private club, which does not have obvious reasons for existence neither from economic nor from spiritual points of public view. This work about generous thinking is very thought-provoking and invokes an emotional response in the sphere of reflection on educational policy. This emotional response may be due to the fact that critical thinking in its essence is directed to the formation of the active position of its bearer and the formation of primarily personal benefit, while the public good is secondary although not excluded. Generous thinking, based on our understanding, at its core is about rising above personal ambitions and is based on overcoming our basic nature, which on the contrary requires a primary focus on the public good instead of personal bias. Thus, there is a reason to believe that at the basis of the existing opposition there are some natural, inborn causes springing from the trivial selfishness and egocentrism. That could hinder the process of combining both types of thinking in practice and in our point of view has to be taken into account.

↳ Reply



**Velisar**

16 October 2016 at 5.07 pm

The author in the text emphasizes important trend emerging in recent years. University turns out science development space. Places where there are new outlook on life, in professional courses. Preparation of specialists with a focus on the current state of the labor market, is one of these manifestations. Based on the current situation, humanitarian experts of today are not as in demand as a consequence of interest in the humanities education falls.

However, the education received at the university in my opinion is still somewhat more important than the education obtained in training courses. The labor market is changing rapidly, one education for life is not enough, more and more people get a new

profession or improve their skills. Getting high-quality liberal arts education a person becomes an important part of the progress of society.

That this is largely due to the need for funding of arts education on a par with the technical sciences. In addition I would like to ask for an independent development of education as a kind of independent value, independent of the possibility of obtaining material and financial wealth.

In my opinion today is a new stable trend of civilization. The increase in the population's welfare in developed countries would move to a qualitatively new level of life, which will change the concept of labor itself. The spread of so-called "helicopter money", a certain minimum guaranteed set of benefits and services provided by the state – will allow a person – resident, of these states to deal exclusively with the development – including self-development, without worrying about the minimum requirements, thus fluctuations in the market of labor will cease to be decisive, in choosing a profession.

In this way, given the rising value of the development, including the development of society (routine work is not associated with the development – will cease to exist as such ceased to exist on bulls plowing fields), the humanities will become much more popular in society than now.

However, how to make a quality liberal arts education? How it should be in the present conditions? What should give it to the person who puts his work in getting this education? How to increase the value of arts education now?

In my opinion the article owl authors provide answers to these questions. But much remains unclear.

↳ Reply



**Ksenya Sidorova**

16 October 2016 at 5.20 pm

I really like the structure of your book. I think that these ideas are very accurate and relevant. That is the way that you have chosen to disclose the approach to liberal education. The truth is that it seems to me as a little banal approach to liberal education. You (followed by others) state that there is a false relationship between higher education and the market economy. Perhaps it is, but there is another side. This side is connection between higher education and schools. I think that everyday trouble is lack of realization of humanitarianism in schools. Those children who are doing well with the curriculum and science education are on mathematics, law, physics, and

chemistry programs. To the Faculty of Arts get people “unfit to school.” And this trend is not connected directly with motivation to study at university and then finding a job. What about the students of other faculties, we can see that their behavior and future prospects are not related to the subject of their specialization. There klutz-physics are the same as the klutz-linguists. But physics students were able to study good physics in school, while philologists didn’t have this chance. And it tells us nothing about the these people’s ability to think.

A confirmation of my thoughts is your remark about the lack of “reading for pleasure in the school.” This suggests that the applicants are not ready for the humanities in any cases. In contrast to the applicants for the study of the exact sciences. Perhaps this contradiction is hidden behind a veil of prestige and future economic success? Success in school does not mean future success in life, does it?

↳ Reply



**Katya Z.V.**

16 October 2016 at 7.27 pm

Thanks for such interesting article! Much text, and it’s not always “convenient” for reading stylistically, but it contains a lot of ideas for reflection and interesting examples. For me, the thesis «reading with rather than reading against» is the one of the most impressive in the text and the one with which I am thinking about at the previous time. And from the position of a student, I can say that to learn critical approach to reading and writing texts even more difficult than to teach it (for you), even with a strong desire for both. From this the crisis of communicate with a range of broader publics arises. And the example of physics is very relevant here: their research goals are on the surface and in the most general sense, understood by all. However, the general discourse on the study, is unavailable for understanding for people, far from this area. In humanities, on the contrary: operating by accessible and interesting methods for people, they hide a complex questions for rapid understanding. Therefore, for humanities researcher it is important to explain not only how you’re doing things but what and why you’re doing them.

The topic of criticism by the way, also revealed is a quite interesting way. I agree with the author that the problems begin from the school time. The borders of the educational process, expressed in the rules and the lack of freedom, on the one hand, do not let us express our thoughts in a right way (as a speaker), and on the other, to give a relevant feedback (as a listener). Therefore, it is important to make efforts to

become free and open when you speaking and to be a good listener. And this “charitable listening” implies not to criticize for the fact criticism and try to give yourself a chance to think through, and the other person to open up.

↳ Reply



**Camilla & Grigoriy & Tatyana**

17 October 2016 at 6.20 am

Thank you for such an inspiring text, Kathleen! I liked the idea not to disagree and criticize the work of others but try to understand it with respect and love. I agree that this is an important thing, and that negative comments of others can make you feel uncomfortable, unhappy or even sick, and I had such an experience.

Of course, the humanities carry a role in shaping the society as a whole and in shaping the thinking of the individual in particular. In the study of the humanities, we can gain the skills needed in the modern world. If the humanities were pointless, this area could not have lived so long.

But it’s not clear to me how to make this idea (generous thinking) real, in other words, how to develop that generosity of mind in all of us? You write about importance of the ability of listening and so on, but you don’t mention how to cultivate this ability in people and society we live in.

Should it be developed in schools or in institutions of higher education? Such development will be mandatory or optional? Or it should be outside the education system – for example, in the family or in social networks?

I believe that all these abilities are clearly necessary not only for the younger generation; but also every person who considers themselves intelligent and well-educated needs to understand what are we talking about and needs to be interested in.

↳ Reply



**Max, Julia, Igor**

17 October 2016 at 10.15 am

Thank you for your thoughts on the current situation and the role of the Liberal Arts in the university and beyond. The cult of the usefulness and effectiveness dominating in the modern society, forces us to perceive human sciences, as more marginalized field than it really is. Meanwhile, as you said, and I totally agree with that – the ability to

think perceive information critically, to resist manipulation, to express thoughts properly (both in verbal and in writing) – are becoming increasingly important factors for the individual and the whole society in the current globalized world.

You paid attention to another important problem of modern society: the problem of distrust, of not understanding the other. Usually we express our disagreement with others positions, because of our disability to understand and perceive critically their interpretation of events. Work with ourselves and with the social reality through constant reflection and review of such differences is probably the strongest point of liberal education (you also mention this in the text). This forms different ways of human's cooperation with the "different" ones and with the world. This in turn can promote the growth of social trust and social capital, the relevance of which increases in our times.

However, with the beginning of the era of globalization, universities task should not be limited only to the maintenance of capital. In this sense your thoughts are similar to the ideas of Martha Nussbaum. Breeding of openness to dialogue and empathy, bringing up citizens of the world becomes the most important task of the Liberal Arts. And this task can justify the existence of the University, no less than the indicators of economic efficiency. Moreover, we understand that in perspective liberal education can give a lot of benefits to the society. But what criteria can we use to measure such a contribution? In addition, there is a risk that the state will begin to use Liberal Arts for their own purposes: for example, to cultivate a particular model of citizenship. How in your opinion we can resist this?

↳ Reply



**Pukhomelina Kayki Ivina**

17 October 2016 at 4.50 pm

«Consider this the start of a conversation, a call in hope of response»...

These words and public presentation of article for discussion reflects the main call of Kathleen Fitzpatrick.

Kathleen asks us to think about the causes of the problems of humanitarian education, which they say some facts, such as: lower level Humanities students, the lack of jobs, the reduction of the budget. We can say that society in conditions of economic necessity have lost the understanding of the value of humanitarian education, on the one hand. On the other, scientists themselves are often unhappy when uninitiated the public intervenes in the academic field.

The author determines the importance of a humanitarian education for the development of ways of thinking, representations of activities and cultural understanding. The author recalls that the original goals of higher education were these: “they were developed in order to cultivate a particular model of citizenship based on exclusion and oppression and focused on the reproduction of state power”. However, it is a humanitarian education allows to model “ways of being that we would like to see manifested in the world.”

The University is unable to solve the problems which it faced. And on the other hand inside the University there is a potential that can “help us navigate the current crises, if not to solve them”. This requires rethinking fundamental things. So, according to the author, the power of the Humanities have always been critical approach and somewhat public inaccessibility. To advance humanitarian education had to face opposition, to alter the views to move through the resistance. Today, this principle ceased to work. The author introduces the concept of “Generous thinking” as a new approach to the rethinking of the Humanities and mission of the University. His role the author sees in the creation of spaces that unites the Universities and what is around them.

This will allow scientists to go beyond classrooms and to those emotions which are necessary to achieve socially oriented goals. It “creates an opportunity for genuine dialogue not only with colleagues but also with our objects of study, our predecessors, and many potential publics that surround us”. A true work of “scientists” in the Academy and beyond carries the “spirit of service”. Therefore, the “Generous thinking” involves the ability to be patient, interaction with what is “outside” a kind of “critical humility”.

Empathy, joint decision, dialogue between the society and the University, perhaps the thought of the author...

↳ Reply



**Vlada**

17 October 2016 at 5.29 pm

Thank you for your outstanding interpretation of the problem, this is truly above and beyond. I've really appreciated the idea that «critical thinking often presupposes a deep knowledge of a subject, not just on the part of the speaker but of the listener as well» and that «generous, generative modes of thinking invite non-experts into the discussion, bringing them along in the process of discovery.»

There is no doubt that critical thinking is important in today's society because it gives individuals the ability to not only understand what they have read or been shown, but also to build upon that knowledge without prior guidance. Critical thinking teaches students that knowledge is endless and constructs upon itself; it is not merely conditioning memorization or the skill to catch onto lessons automatically. Critical thinking allows individuals the ability to think clearly and rationally and these skills are important for whatever one chooses to do in life. For example, as G. Randy Katsen said, "The ability to think critically is one skill separating innovators from followers... and this type of thinking can neutralize the sway of an unsupported argument."

However, I have the same question as in the previous comment: how can we develop generous thinking and in particular critical thinking? How we can approximate to the generous, generative modes of thinking? And which educational institution has to take on this role?

↳ Reply



**Kathleen Fitzpatrick**

18 October 2016 at 2.54 pm

Hi, all. Thank you so much for these engaging responses! You've raised some really important questions that I'm going to be chewing on for a bit. Am I correct in guessing that you've read the draft for a class? If so, can I ask what class it's for?

↳ Reply



**Dop**

19 October 2016 at 9.22 am

Hi! You are so keen 😊 That's for philosophy of education.

↳ Reply



**Katerina & Artem**

19 October 2016 at 5.32 pm

Kathleen, you are right! We (and the guys before) are students of the Higher School of Economics (Moscow). Our Master's programme 'Evidence-based educational policy'. The professor of the course 'The philosophy of education' asked us to read your text and to comment.

First of all we want to say that it's a great idea to share your thoughts in the process of writing a book. We believe that the discussion will help you to prepare a good philosophical project. Good luck with it!

Because of the course our heads are full of texts about the system of modern university. Unfortunately, bough of us are not impressed of yours. There are a lot of facts but there are no touching examples or unpredictable judgments which can catch student's attention. Also, you wrote arguments without mentioning specific actors. For example, a sentence from your text 'The study of literature, history, art, philosophy, and other forms of culture has been justly lauded by those whose business it is to teach those fields as a key means of providing students with a rich set of interpretive, critical, and ethical skills with which they can engage the world around them. These reading, thinking, and writing skills are increasingly necessary in today's..' We don't know what businesses you wanted to touch and why these skills are important and to whom they are related.

To sum it up, we think that modern philosophers (you, for example) should clearly describe their ideas in attractive forms like modern fashion or travel bloggers. It will help to catch the attention of public and to prove that philosophers education should be subsidized by the taxpayer.

↳ Reply



**Kathleen Fitzpatrick (@kfitz)**

20 October 2016 at 10.32 am

A Russian seminar on the philosophy of education has been reading Generous Thinking. I'd love to see your responses. <https://t.co/4mCsr344vP>

↳ Reply



**Eli**

24 October 2016 at 2.31 pm

So, just to demonstrate that I can read “with” before I read “against,” it sounds to me as though you’re expressing a desire to have a twofold professional life – that is, to be scholar and a something-else. As I understand it, you think that the scholarship part is fairly well understood and well-defined (albeit maybe less so in the humanities than in the hard sciences): there’s research, and there’s criticism, and there’s teaching, and so on. The other part, however, is the part that’s hazier and that you’d like to bring into sharper focus.

(And, yes, I understand that you think that these two things are related – are interrelated, even. But two things that are interrelated are still two things, and so if you’ll forgive me I’m going to treat them separately for the time being.)

As I read you, this something-else role is one that’s almost more like a mentor (or, if you prefer the more precise but more limiting language of religion, a guru or a cleric): this role still has requires an intellectual commitment of sorts, but the commitment is geared more towards socializing (so to speak) than it is towards the dominant academic model of truth-seeking. And when I say “socializing,” I mean a wide swath of activities that are crucial for making societies happen: one-on-one interaction, yes, but also the facilitation of group discussions, the intentional shaping of calendars or schedules, the establishment of cultural norms, and so on. In this role, you would be less of an established expert than, at most, a part-time guide.

If all of that sounds right – if I’ve read “with” you to this point – then let me now begin to push back a little. In particular (and for the sake of focusing on just one question at a time), I want to ask how hard you’ve worked to enter into this mentor/guide/something-else role outside of the academy. Again, I hear you when you say that you want to do all of this within the academy. I hear you when you say that you think it’ll make you a better academic. Still, it seems to me that you’re trying to reinvent the wheel somewhat, and so I’m curious to hear what you’ve learned from studying the people who already do similar things outside of the academy – religious leaders, sports coaches, community arts teachers, and so on. Are those people on your radar? Do you take inspiration from them? Would your proposal have you do anything fundamentally differently from what they do? Those are the sorts of questions that I have in mind at the moment.

↳ Reply



**Kathleen Fitzpatrick**



25 October 2016 at 8.38 am

Hi, Eli. Thanks for the comment, which I've been pondering since you posted it yesterday. (I've also seen your less "softly-worded" blog post, but haven't yet had time to fully digest it.) I appreciate your attempt to read with me here, before leaping into critique, but I'm not at all sure that I agree with your interpretation.

The divides you point to — both the closing "inside" and "outside" of the academy, and the "scholar" and "something else" roles we play — are exactly the thing I am trying to push us past. In large part, the goal of *Generous Thinking* is to ask us to step back and ask how we might differently operate if we as academics understood our work not to fall into the three conventional categories of research, teaching, and the distant third, service, but instead grounded all of it in an ethos of service: service to our students, service to our institutions, service to our communities of practice, service to our local communities, service to the broader public. How might our approaches to engaging the public — and our approaches to engaging one another — begin to shift if we started from a position of generosity, rather than leaping to the kind of critique that shuts down rather than opens up?

You're right that there are many people, in many publicly-oriented walks of life, who embody that mode of being already. But the academy by and large does not, and I believe that it should.

There's much more to respond to, both here and in your blog post, but the public-facing aspects of my life are calling. More, I hope, to follow — and particularly as the rest of the project progresses.

↳ Reply



**Christopher Landrum**

25 October 2016 at 11.01 am

*This project is in large part about my desire to see universities and those who work in and around them — faculty members and administrators, in particular, but also staff members, students, parents, trustees, legislators, and the many other people who affect the futures of our institutions of higher education — cultivate a greater disposition toward listening, toward patience, **toward engaging with what is actually in front of us rather than continually pressing forward to where we want to go.***

Is this not what Johnson was getting at in “Rambler 02?” Johnson writes:

*This quality of looking forward into futurity, seems the unavoidable condition of a being, whose motions are gradual, and whose life is progressive: as his powers are limited, he must use means for the attainment of his ends, and intend first what he performs last; as by continual advances from his first stage of existence, he is perpetually varying the horizon of his prospects, he must always discover new motives of action, new excitements of fear, and allurements of desire....*

*What is new is opposed, because most are unwilling to be taught; and what is known is rejected, because it is not sufficiently considered, that men more frequently require to be reminded than informed. The learned are afraid to declare their opinion early, lest they should put their reputation in hazard; the ignorant always imagine themselves giving some proof of delicacy, when they refuse to be pleased: and he that finds his way to reputation through all these obstructions, must acknowledge that he is indebted to other causes besides his industry, his learning, or his wit.*

↳ Reply



**Kathleen Fitzpatrick**

25 October 2016 at 11.18 am

That is fantastic — thanks so much for a connection that I wouldn't have made on my own.

↳ Reply



**Christopher Landrum**

25 October 2016 at 12.21 pm

I want to take the credit, but I can't, because several times in the works of Walter Jackson Bate he emphasizes how important he thinks the “Rambler 02” essay is.

↳ Reply



**Eli**

25 October 2016 at 11.07 am

Okay, so not “role” – “function”? “Aspect”? “Facet”? “Element”? “Component”? Since you’ve read my post, you know that I don’t have an academic’s tendency to insist on a certain lexicon; if we can agree on what we’re trying to refer to, I don’t much care how we refer to it. But do you, at the very least, agree that research is not the same as classroom instruction is not the same as engaging with the general public and so on? Again, those things may be interrelated, and I think that the type or nature of interrelationship that you have in mind is “service,” but the very concept of an interrelationship presumes that there are multiple, distinct things between which a relationship can exist. Part of what I’m trying to get here (as opposed to on my blog) is just a straightforward “yes” or a “no” to the question of whether all of these things – roles, elements, functions, facets, aspects, whichever name you prefer – are separate threads that you see as being woven together or whether you see them as being literally the same thing.

(If it helps, I have a basketball analogy. Offense and defense are both basketball things, and they’re interrelated tactically and strategically, but offense isn’t defense. It would indeed be a major mistake to say that basketball is only one of those things or that one of them is the main focus and the other is a tangential or marginal concern. But, nevertheless, they’re still two separate activities/facets/roles/insert-your-preferred-word-here, and we would lose something valuable if we refused to ever distinguish one from the other.)

Anyway, the other thing I’m asking (here, not on the blog; those are two separate, although also related, lines of thought) is not whether you know that service happens elsewhere or whether you want service to happen within the academy. And if I came across as asking whether you’d \*bothered to\* try to engage in service outside of the academy, allow me to apologize – that wasn’t my intention. (You’ve read the blog, you know that I’m happy to be plain-old aggressive instead of passive-aggressive.) I’m asking about non-academic service because of my own experiences with and inquiries into this general subject, most of which have led me to the belief that service (in your sense or, indeed, any other) is really, really, really, really, really, really hard, both for individuals and, crucially, for institutions (organizations, communities, groups; again, I’m not married to any one of these words). And I don’t just mean that it requires effort or painful sacrifice but, rather, that service-based activity can only be sustained if it’s supported by a surprisingly complex and resource-intensive infrastructure. Even if you’re right to say that service should be (or, perhaps, in some sense already is) the guiding principle of the academy, that still leaves open the practical question(s) about how to implement that principle or act on it.

So I guess I'll clarify: have you specifically looked at what makes it possible for service to happen outside of the academy? And not just to happen sporadically or in short bursts but as a long, regular, sustained activity? If so – and I have to assume that you have – what have you learned from that research?

↳ Reply



**Kathleen Fitzpatrick**

25 October 2016 at 11.29 am

You are absolutely right that the kind of service I'm talking about is super hard, and perhaps nigh unto impossible without the institutional supports that the academy does not currently provide. Hence this project, which is intended (especially in its final chapter) to be an argument on behalf of developing that infrastructure in a concerted way.

But what you are engaging with here is the very first piece of writing toward a very long, and very in-process project. To be asked in that context whether I have looked specifically at any given text or field or community is of course to be asked whether I have *bothered* to do so. Inevitably the answer can only be, given what you see in front of you, *not yet*, not in the ways you want me to have, which serves your critical end well and my attempts to gather direction a whole lot less well. So I am going to translate your question into a helpful suggestion that I take a look at the kinds of work you are describing, and I thank you very much for it.

↳ Reply



**Eli**

25 October 2016 at 1.12 pm

“But what you are engaging with here is the very first piece of writing toward a very long, and very in-process project. To be asked in that context whether I have looked specifically at any given text or field or community is of course to be asked whether I have *bothered* to do so.”

Now, c'mon, that's hardly fair. It could very well have been the case that you were inspired to do this project precisely *\*because\** you had already looked elsewhere. Or it could've been the case that you have preexisting experience in one or more non-

academic service area (as many academics do, if not with service per se than at least with an activity that relates to their research). Or, y'know, something – basically, if you'd had a specific paradigm in mind based off of your own prior knowledge or experience, that would've given me (and any of your other interlocutors) a solid basis from which to make specific, well-informed responses to various parts of what you're describing. Alternatively, I guess I could've just presumed that you hadn't done this research and simply told you to do some, but then how would that have come across if you \*had\* already done the legwork? Try to think about this from my perspective: I can't possibly know about your life in advance of you telling me, so I have to risk sounding condescending one way or the other. In that sort of situation, it's kinda up to you to not take umbrage simply because I guessed wrong.

But okay – yes, in the absence of you having done any of that research, I think that you probably should, which, incidentally, is a recommendation that serves your attempts to gather direction just fine. I'll even go out of my way to give you specific examples: I think you'd be well served to look at institutions that are vibrant and strong (like medicine, say) and contrast those with institutions that are seemingly on the decline (some forms of organized religion, e.g.) and those that are seemingly on the rise (maybe nonreligious service organizations, or socialist political groups, or something). If and when you do, I'd be interested to hear what you learned from it. I wasn't being coy the first time I said that.

And, look, one more unsolicited piece of advice? If you're going to talk about generous, generative, “yes”-based thinking, it might be a good idea to actually act that way even with people who act differently. I mean, what kind of person says to a stranger over the internet, “No, even though you say you meant X when you said X, you really meant Y”? What kind of person goes to a blog with my subhead – you \*did\* read my subhead, right? – and then comes away thinking that my “project” is purely “critical”? And I'm not even a real threat to you! I'm just a guy on the internet! If you abandon your ethos under such light pressure, how can you ever expect it to succeed in the (for lack of a better term) real world?

I dunno – good luck with what you're doing. I hope you eventually reach the point where you can look back on this and think, “Geez, maybe I flew off the handle a little bit, maybe he had something valuable to say and was mostly just trying to figure out where to start.” We'll see, I guess.

↳ Reply

**Kathleen Fitzpatrick**

25 October 2016 at 6.47 pm

You know, you're right: I, like everyone, have my points of deeply ingrained defensiveness. One of them — a part of academic socialization that I am trying to undo, in myself as much as in the culture — is around questions that sound to me too much like “you're doing it wrong.” I will think about this carefully, and I thank you for your comments.

[↪ Reply](#)**@bookbread**

25 October 2016 at 3.35 pm

Really enjoyed this piece about generous thinking by @kfitz #reading #humanities <https://t.co/cVsObs1GWX>

[↪ Reply](#)**kari kraus**

26 October 2016 at 12.04 am

Love this project, Kathleen. It feels especially vital in the final weeks leading up to the election, and I can't help but wish that generous thinking as you've conceptualized it—including listening, empathy, and love—could form the backbone of local, community-driven civics initiatives.

[↪ Reply](#)**Francois Lachance**

17 November 2016 at 10.36 am

Your invocation of humility brought to mind a formulation found in Catharine R. Stimpson. *Where the Meanings Are: Feminism and Cultural Spaces* “[...] humility, a recognition that the self cannot be an exemplum, only an experiment”. I am looking forward to reading more. I think that somewhere along the way you and your readers will be broaching the link between the experimental [which we associate with the

sciences] and the experiential [which we associate with the performing arts] – the humanities seem to occupy the metadiscursive space that examines and comments upon the experimental and the experiential.

↳ Reply



**Kathleen Fitzpatrick**

20 November 2016 at 7.20 am

Thank you for this, Francois. I'm grateful for the reference, and I very much like the notion of locating the humanities in that metadiscursive space. I'll look forward to sharing more in the coming weeks.

↳ Reply



**Francois Lachance**

22 November 2016 at 8.51 am

Susan Ford in a posting to the Humanist discussion list brought forward a very interesting analogy for the work of the generous thinker. She compared the task to that of a museum guide or a teacher. She wrote:

But Francois bids us embrace Kathleen Fitzpatrick's 'generous thinking' and perhaps any kind of 'clash' cannot be encompassed in that. KF emphasises that critique must not be thrown out but must be – added to, I suppose – so that the object is enlarged and not lost. There is an obvious analogy with the stretched intellectual operations of a teacher or museum guide speaking to a class / group whose existing knowledge she is ignorant of: every sentence must be hyper-reactive, at the same time as moving a narrative forward so as to offer / enable a coherent experience

<http://lists.digitalhumanities.org/pipermail/humanist/2016-November/014322.html>

I do like that expression of “stretched intellectual operations”.

↳ Reply



**Kathleen Fitzpatrick**

23 November 2016 at 7.03 am

I like that as well, and particularly the work of remaining receptive to one's audience's response, so as to ensure that the discussion continues.

↳ Reply



**@ISCHistory**

29 November 2016 at 7.22 am

Great long read on the importance of really listening and thinking generously by @kfitz <https://t.co/sMkflk4vVn>

↳ Reply

Pingback: [January 30: Overview of Team Project + Team Formation – Understanding Media Studies Spring 2017](#)

Pingback: [Scales of Measurement and the Public Good – HuMetricsHSS](#)



**Abi Lemak (@AbiLemak)**

8 June 2017 at 1.47 pm

@alisakbeer I owe these thought bursts to my encounters with @kfitz's concept of "generous thinking" (<https://t.co/mqrBEdcqBj>)

↳ Reply



**@plidsicle**

21 August 2017 at 6.18 pm

revisiting <https://t.co/y54l4gFSz6> and hoping it will unstick my stressed-out over-critical brain a bit.

↳ Reply

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