Beyond Bread Alone. On Scientism, Work and Culture in Contemporary Education

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Abstract:
The aim of the article is to explore the limitations of relying solely on material comfort, science, or work as the foundation for a meaningful life. Drawing on philosophical and historical perspectives, it argues that true human flourishing requires more than physical sustenance or technological advancement – it depends on purpose, autonomy, culture, and human connection. In order to advance this point, the text critiques the dominance of scientism and technocentrism, warning against neglecting the symbolic and humanistic dimensions essential to education and ethical development in an age shaped by AI and rapid technological change. To complement its critical approach, it examines contemporary cultural behaviours among the younger generation by presenting survey findings that highlight the evolving challenges in preparing them for a meaningful life beyond employment. Finally, it considers "the two cultures" and the possibility of a restored collaboration between science and the humanities in their strive for this goal and, eventually, for human self-understanding.

Keywords: science, humanities, culture, work, education, AI technology

A preamble

The selection of the article's title was guided by its evocative power to suggest the complexity of this subject – one that, although not theological, resonates with profound philosophical undertones. The phrase "Man shall not live by bread alone", which originates in the Old Testament of the Bible (*Deuteronomy* 8:3) and is quoted again in the New Testament (*Matthew's Gospel*, 4:4), has evolved in modern parlance to signify that material comfort is insufficient for a meaningful life. Human flourishing – Aristotle's *eudaimonia* – requires not just physical sustenance, but also deep connections, a sense of purpose, and intellectual engagement. Yet this perspective generates further questions, shaped by the epistemic paradigms of our era. In a world where terms such as "soul", "spirit", and "wisdom" are sometimes met with scepticism outside the context of theology, philosophy or poetry, we must scrutinize the "diet" of contemporary life – one increasingly composed of science, technology, and work – and consider what these

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elements mean for education and culture. At the same time, framing the initial hypotheses as questions, besides referencing the original idiom, is intended to encourage further consideration and a balanced examination of the topic, rather than pontificate or deliver peremptory guidelines.

By science alone?

One of the paradoxes of modernity lies in the tension between rapid scientific progress and the inherently human need for meaning. The limitations of science in providing moral and spiritual guidance were noted by the champion of empiricism himself. When Auguste Compte proposed a "religion of humanity" (Grayling, 2010: 384), he seemed to admit that, while scientific and technological advances have illuminated our world, perhaps we ought not to reduce all reasoning to what is empirically verifiable (Pope Benedict XVI, 2006). Science itself, originally rooted in scepticism, has assumed an almost dogmatic status today, at times overshadowing other forms of inquiry – historical, literary, philosophical (Haack, 2012: 2). This problematic stance, known as scientism, insists that scientific inquiry is the sole legitimate pathway to truth. Yet, as Professor Susan Haack argues, music, art, dance, and other human activities possess inherent value, independent of scientific analysis (Haack, 2012: 2, 4).

The rise of AI has further entrenched scientism, fostering a new "data religion" that challenges notions of selfhood and free will: "The sacred word 'freedom' turns out to be, just like 'soul', a hollow term empty of any discernible meaning. Free will exists only in the imaginary stories we humans have invented" (Harari, 2017: 329)[1]. Algorithms are increasingly entrusted with authority once reserved for human judgement, threatening to supplant humanism in favour of a data-centric worldview where human health, happiness and freedom "may seem far less important" (Harari, 2017: 460) than the free flow of data, which becomes "the greatest good of all" (Harari, 2017: 445). However, envisioning technological advancement as the end of all other inquiry is itself a form of scientism, neglecting the symbolic and cultural dimensions that define our humanity (Haack, 2012: 21).

Moreover, the extension of scientific methodology from the study of the natural world to the realm of human nature and ethics[2] is fraught with risk (Thornton, 2016: 1). The perception of science as

[1] Alexandre (2018: 52) also touches on the problem of free will as inseparable from being human. However, in a biologist framework that favours nature over nurture, the odds are stacked against the notion of human freedom.

[2] It may also a form of scientism to apply the method and language of the natural sciences to all disciplines, focusing too much on tools and techniques (form) and too little on the specific substance of inquiry (Haack, 2012: 8, 9). In fact, "there is no 'scientific method' used by all and only scientists" (Haack, 2012: 17).

purely factual, "entirely 'value-free' and wholly irrelevant to normative questions, is far too crude" (Haack, 2012: 20) and can yield ethically ambiguous outcomes – particularly as we navigate issues such as genetic selection and AI. To ignore the "fallibility, and limitations and potential dangers" of science, whether willingly or not, is just as misguided as to reject its benefits entirely (Haack, 2012: 3). Both science and technology lack intrinsic self-restraint, necessitating external tempering by language and culture, the symbolic dimension typical to human beings (Alexandre, 2018: 21, 38, 40). There are already voices that warn against the exhilarating promises of a technological superintelligence by underlining the need to "hold on to our humanity: our groundedness, common sense, and good-humoured decency" to find a way to a "compassionate and jubilant use" of our most advanced technological achievement to date (Bostrom, 2017: 320).

The promises of transhumanism, the prevalent mindset in Silicon Valley (Alexandre, 2018: 8, 45), highlight the potential costs of technological enhancement and the drive to conquer death: diminished cognitive abilities (Hsu, 2025; Alexandre, 2018: 116; Spitzer, 2024: 17), and the loss of valuable cultural practices (Haack, 2012: 24) deriving their significance from our mortal condition. Without it, all the expressions of symbolic life that make our culture (art, music, literature) are valueless (Alexandre, 2018: 70-71). The assertion that science – particularly biology and physics – will eventually offer a comprehensive explanation of all aspects of existence, including the nuanced realities of human subjectivity, may foster unrealistic expectations for self-understanding and for achieving what Aristotle termed *eudaimonia*: "well-doing and well-being, flourishing, a sense of fittingness and achievement in the course of daily life" (Grayling, 2008: 25). While such an essentialist and mechanistic perspective risks overlooking the complex interplay between individuals and the cultures and societies they help shape, a more productive approach recognizes human subjectivity as a dynamic, *sui generis* phenomenon best explored through "humanistic" disciplines, with their own conceptual framework and vocabulary (Grayling, 2008: 143): "Subjectivity and culture are not explicable in biological terms alone. We need history, philosophy, literature and the arts too. Understanding this is a prerequisite for understanding human interests and entitlements" (Grayling, 2008: 144) and ultimately for the development of global ethics and the pursuit of a better world (Grayling, 2008: 146).

By work alone?

Work occupies a little more than a third of our adult lives (Baggini, 2021: 399), and is increasingly valorised as an end in itself. Yet defining life solely by work risks reducing existence to acquisition

and consumption. As it emerges from Max Weber's account, the highest good of a life lived according to a productivity culture is "completely devoid of any *eudaimonistic* admixture" (Weber, 1992: 18), so that any concept of happiness in this context becomes simply irrational. This is the opposite of Aristotle's conception of a life well-lived by embracing purposeful leisure and cultivating the mind, soul, and relationships, rather than fixating solely on productivity. Meant as a step in the right direction, the contemporary pursuit of a "work-life balance" reflects, instead, a separation between work and living (Baggini, 2021: 401), failing to capture the integration of instrumental activities with activities enjoyed for their own sake, as recommended by Hume in his philosophy of everyday life (Hume, 1777). For many people nowadays, the allure of AI is to render work more efficient, potentially expanding leisure. However, the character and quality of that leisure is crucial. If technology replaces fundamental skills like reading, writing or even thinking (Cunningham, 2025), we risk impoverishing both work and the choice of how we spend our leisure time.

As one journalist notes in the case of travelling, most people today prefer to travel faster than to improve their memory by paying attention to their surroundings, so "what is worth preserving, and what do we feel comfortable off-loading in the name of efficiency?" (Hsu, 2025) becomes a question worth pondering. There are people who still view the extensive use of gadgets as a negation of the wisdom one may acquire about oneself as a result of life experience and self-knowledge (Alexandre, 2018: 132). Educators also note that human autonomy in the digital age depends on maintaining knowledge and expertise within our own minds (Miclea, 2023; Spitzer, 2024: 15). The question of autonomy is all the more pressing as "academics notice with dismay that students with the vast resources of the internet available to them seem to have forgotten […] how to read an actual book" (Haack, 2012: 23). It takes an effort of imagination to foresee what the labour market may look like even in the near future. The situation calls for educational systems to be reformed (Alexandre, 2018: 90) by identifying those domains where human intelligence and autonomous expertise will remain indispensable to collaboration with AI (Alexandre, 2018: 116). As we won't be able to compete with machines on technical matters, "the humanities and culture in general need to be rebooted" (Alexandre, 2018: 117) in order to "keep a lid on the deficit in the symbolic function […] on which the preservation of what is human depends" (Alexandre, 2018: 116).

However, as mentioned before, contemporary education often privileges science and technical skills at the expense of literature and history, thus becoming "a rather partial matter" (Grayling, 2010: 153)

that only some great universities[3] still strive to redress. The imbalance[4] seems to echo, in reverse, the ancient Greek distinction between practical, technical or vocational training (banaustic education) for one's working life, and the study of liberal arts for "refinement of character and the development of moral virtues" (Grayling, 2010: 153), the equipment needed for the virtuous use of one's leisure time as well. The elitist implications of this educational approach has endured, which is why, while obviously both kinds are necessary and complementary, the emphasis in educational attitudes today may tend to favour the banaustic direction (Grayling, 2010: 153). While practical skills are indispensable, true education should cultivate the whole person, balancing vocational and humanistic subjects. Besides, education extends beyond institutional boundaries, encompassing the totality of lived experience found in literature[5], films, theatre, museums. All these sources provide an "education of the emotions, sensibilities and attitudes" (Grayling, 2010: 154). It is a mark of the best schools and universities to use these broader cultural avenues for instruction today, addressing the needs of individuals both as citizens and as human beings.

One of the consequences of the increasingly diverse specialisations required by advanced economies is the overshadowing of those aspects pertaining to a liberal education that address the needs of the whole person rather than only those of the future employee (Grayling, 2010: 155; Grayling, 2008: 71, 135) by giving equal weight to humanistic subjects (literature, history, the arts) and scientific and practical subjects (Grayling, 2008: 138). Neither mathematics and science alone, nor literature and history alone can address the students' needs for a life well-lived (Grayling, 2010: 155; Haack, 2016: 191) or ensure an ethical societal environment. While the former may equip them for the world of work, the latter will equip them for the personal, social and political requirements of life. Since the humanities carry "the elements of civilised human existence" (Grayling, 2010: 155), it becomes a matter of concern when their importance is overlooked or diminished. Teachers usually understand that it is part of their mission to

[3] Such as University of Oxford, which offers interdisciplinary undergraduate courses that may combine science subjects with humanistic subjects (e.g. "Physics and Philosophy", "Human Sciences").

[4] "The humanities have become the weak sister of the sciences" […] "classified as luxury items in national and state budgets" (Wilson, 2017: 61, 63); "Above them both [the arts and the humanities], casting a deep shadow like some alien mother ship parked above Manhattan, are the natural sciences" (Wilson, 2017: 63).

[5] According to Grayling, literature (novels, drama, poetry) is one of the richest resources to explore the meanings, conflicts and dilemmas of life. By the situations it constructs, it tackles questions about choice and the proper course of action (Grayling, 2008: 30) in daily interactions.

prepare students to find meaningful employment after graduation, but few would describe this objective as their only objective, let alone as their highest moral purpose (Buller, 2014: 4).

A survey of student cultural habits

Culture, in its many forms, is rooted in humanistic values. The Latin origins of the word evoke cultivation – of soil, but also, metaphorically, of the mind and manners. Informed by Cicero's concept of *humanitas,* Renaissance promoted humanism as a universally-shared virtue defined by compassion, benevolence and social responsibility. To this aim, the anthropocentric paradigm at the heart of the Renaissance encouraged the study of literature, rhetoric, philosophy and history, influential in shaping the modern notion of individuality. The idea emerged that it is not enough to be born human, you need to learn to become humane (Fideler, 2025).

With German Romanticism, the notion acquired the two main meanings we are familiar with today: on the one hand, Herder's particularist concept of culture, emphasising the *Volksgeist* (the spirit of a people) distinctiveness of each culture, on the other, Humboldt's universalist view regarding culture as the intellectual effort to preserve and transmit humanity's heritage (Scruton, 2024: 14). In is in this latter sense that Matthew Arnold, the Victorian critic, defined culture as "the best that has been thought and known in the world" (Arnold, 1889, 31)[6]. While both of these philosophical approaches have shaped modern understandings of individuality and cultural diversity, this paper focuses primarily on the latter interpretation in examining some of the young generation's cultural choices.

A small-scale quantitative survey of students' cultural habits[7] reveals a nuanced engagement with the arts and culture, shaped by both personal preferences and broader societal factors. A majority of respondents – over half – reported attending cultural events such as festivals, theatre performances, or art exhibitions only occasionally, typically a few times per semester, while more than a third participated just once a year or less. This pattern suggests that, for many students, cultural events are special occasions rather than regular fixtures in their lives.

When asked about more specific activities like visiting museums or attending theatre performances, most students admitted to doing so

[6] The position, later continued in the writings of other British critics such as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, upheld the idea that becoming cultured presupposed intelligence and a commitment to safeguarding these universal values (Scruton, 2024: 12).

[7] Applied in May 2025, the survey consisted of twelve questions and had twenty-eight respondents, all first-year students in Management at the Faculty of Economics of Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca.

rarely, often only on special occasions or while traveling. Notably, while every student reported having visited a museum at least once, 61% do so infrequently. Half of them rarely attend live theatre, with 11% never going at all. Again, these results suggest that live performing arts and museum visits may not hold a central place in students' cultural routines, possibly due to competing interests, accessibility, or the growing influence of digital media.

Leisure time is typically spent socializing, attending events, or exploring new activities. However, while 57% enjoy travelling to a different city or country for new cultural experiences, only 11% attend a cultural or artistic event (a concert, a play, an exhibition). No student prefers to visit a museum or explore cultural sites, if given one of the other choices. This reflects the more general popularity of tourism nowadays, despite the fact that cultural experiences associated with tourism are limited, and mostly incidental to entertainment. Only a few dedicate their free time to reading or creative hobbies (18%), and there is a group (11%) who mostly use their free time on work and internship activities. While highlighting the balance students try to strike between social engagement and personal interests, the results show that career preparation and perhaps the need for self-support is a preoccupation that adds to their academic commitments.

Reading habits offer further insight into cultural engagement. Nearly half (46%) of the students read non-academic books only occasionally, with around a third reading regularly and a small minority (7%) never reading any kind of literature outside their coursework. Fiction is the most popular genre, followed by non-fiction, while poetry and plays appeal to very few. Library use is similarly limited (39%), reflecting the rise of digital resources and changing habits around reading and research.

Classical music, often considered a marker of "high culture", plays a minor role in students' lives. Only a small percentage (7%) regularly listen to symphonies, concertos, or operas, while most do so rarely or not at all. This underlines a broader trend: traditional forms of cultural participation are being supplanted, for many, by more accessible or contemporary alternatives.

When it comes to cultural influences, family members and close friends exert the strongest impact, shaping students' tastes and habits. However, a quarter of students cite well-known cultural personalities as role models, but none identify with social or political activists in this regard. This suggests that intimate and familiar influences remain paramount even in an age of celebrity and digital media, but it also reflects the fact that public leadership figures are viewed with mistrust.

The influence of social media is pervasive but nuanced. Over half of the respondents (54%) acknowledge that their cultural interests

are shaped by content they encounter online, while a significant minority (21%) engage actively with cultural material on these platforms. However, a quarter of the students see only limited effects, suggesting that while digital media is ubiquitous, its influence varies widely among individuals.

Finally, students' views on the impact of artificial intelligence on culture are cautiously optimistic. The majority (57%) believe that, despite the rise of AI, traditional cultural practices and human creativity will remain central. A quarter anticipate that AI will play a significant role in shaping new forms of art and cultural experience, while a smaller group (18%) expresses concern that AI could standardize or homogenize cultural production. Yet, all agree that AI will inevitably influence the future of culture to some extent.

Overall, these findings highlight a complex balance between personal choice and external influence, and faith in the value of human creativity within an evolving cultural landscape. Grouping related survey results and clarifying their implications allow us to see more clearly the challenges facing students as they navigate today's fluid cultural setting, especially since the data also indicates students' view that technologies like generative art and AI could have a significant impact on cultural production, similar to the influence on it of social media algorithms (Rothman 2025).

Conclusion

The importance of providing young people with education in both science and the humanities is reflected in C.P. Snow's observations from his Rede lecture on "the two cultures". Delivered at the University of Cambridge in 1959, it highlighted a growing divide between the sciences and the humanities, discussing its impact on society and education: "Literary intellectuals at one pole – at the other Scientists […]. Between the two a gulf of mutual incomprehension" (Snow, 1998: 4) borne out of "a lack of respect" (Wilson, 2017: 62). Despite some optimism expressed by scientists,[8] this separation continues to influence educational policy and student experiences, in a system that is rendered far less ambitious by its too exclusive aim of training students to gain employment (Grayling, 2008: 139)[9]. Consequently, this polarisation

[8] Although there is still no bridge between the two cultures, emerging new disciplines may create a "broad borderland" connecting them, so that, one day, the gap might close (Wilson, 2017: 144).

[9] The humanities are apparently acknowledged as extremely significant and held in high esteem, not least by business leaders, fifty-one percent of whom rank a liberal education as very important, according to a 2013 American survey. However, this value is not reflected in the financial support the institutions providing it receive, or in the admissions policies of the major universities. For instance, an applicant's background in the sciences is now the determining factor in the process of admission at the University of Yale (Wilson, 2017: 62).

(Snow, 1998: 3) remains relevant, with contemporary academics in both humanities (Haack, 2012: 93; Scruton, 2024: 31; Buller, 2014: 1, 2) and the sciences (Wilson, 2017: 145) still referencing it when considering the effects of a focus on scientific disciplines over a broader educational background, which may translate into an emphasis on preparing students for professional, high-productivity careers, rather than fostering wider, life-enhancing cultural interests and habits of an unmarketable kind as well.

Culture is a realm of intrinsic value (Scruton, 2007: 109), intimately tied to the moral values and ideals that a democratic society relies on: "It contains the knowledge of what to feel, in a world where feeling is in constant danger of losing its way" (Scruton, 2007: 89)[10]. Citing Oswald Spengler's remark in *The Decline of the West* (1918), philosopher and academic Roger Scruton points out that the survival of culture depends on each of us (Scruton, 2007: 86). When we stop contemplating paintings by the old masters or listen to classical music, these cultural values and their message will disappear. As seen from the survey, the archives we store our culture in (libraries, universities, museums) do not guarantee its survival. We seem to be living in the aftermath of high culture, a culture in which we have lost faith. Even more worryingly, the signs of its revival through engaged critical thinking have mostly taken place outside the university, in private research institutions, small independent publications and literary circles (Scruton, 2007: 88).

It is hard to predict what AI's effect will be on humanistic culture – whether, for example, it might be replaced by a form of "neuroculture" as some speculate (Alexandre, 2018: 117). In any case, what is increasingly clear is that, as one journalist put it rather ominously, "AI is coming for culture" (Rothman, 2025). It remains to be seen whether the suppression of the classical humanistic culture may give rise to a movement of resistance born out of "revulsion" against the prevailing nihilism of the university and the marketplace (Scruton, 2007: 109). Even though the chances are small that high culture may reclaim the central place it once occupied in university education and in the priorities of politicians,[11] such a movement may succeed in proving that culture matters and that it is worth defending (Scruton, 2007: 109).

At the same time, in a context in which we are "drowning in information and starved for wisdom" (Wilson, 2017: 148), it is necessary to reevaluate the isolated perspectives associated with "the two cultures."

[10] The same idea can be found in Scruton, 2024: 30-31.

[11] Journalist David Remnick notes the ongoing turmoil in American cultural institutions, warning about the dangerous direction democracy takes "when the political boss takes over […], and dictates who's acceptable and who is not" (Remnick, 2025).

As Snow noted, exclusivity within each field can limit broader approaches to knowledge and its applications. Despite ongoing disagreements, misinterpretations, and mutual calls for self-reflection, the relationship between science and the humanities is fundamentally reciprocal, with each discipline informing and influencing the other (Wilson, 2017: 142). That is why a third – and lasting – Enlightenment age (Wilson, 2017: 150) may emerge only if these two branches of inquiry start collaborating to establish the deep connections between biological and cultural evolution, the ultimate "philosopher's stone" of understanding humanity (Wilson, 2017: 147) in all its mutable complexity.

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