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The humanities on sustainability

Greeting from the President

The first thing that comes to mind from the word *sustainability* is not the humanities, but, quite rightly, climate change and its indicators and top scientists, such as Academician of Science Markku Kulmala. He is one of the world's leading researchers in physics and chemistry, an award-winning scholar who, together with his team, has greatly improved our understanding of the interactions between the atmosphere and ecosystems. Several other fields of science have also made an undeniable contribution to verifying and modelling the threats of climate change. But what about the role of the humanities in sustainable development? In posing this question, I do not mean to gauge the value of the *humaniora* versus the formal and natural sciences, but to seek collaboration to address our greatest challenges.

Sustainable development has several dimensions, which can be grouped as follows, for example: ecological sustainability (climate and nature), economic sustainability (production and livelihood), socio-

cultural sustainability (peace, equality and human rights) and political sustainability (democracy, rule of law and good governance). The areas of sustainability are in many ways layered and mutually interactive. For example, sharing the costs of ecological sustainability between states and individuals is an issue of international politics and social justice. The preconditions for economic sustainability may be linked to various cultural, social and political elements of sustainability, such as respecting human rights and other due diligence obligations of companies.

Sustainability in a wider 'Brundtlandian' sense offers the humanities an opening to engage in sustainability research. Gro Harlem Brundtland chaired the commission convened by the UN, which in 1987 published a report on sustainable development entitled *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future*. Section 27 of the report states: "Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable to ensure



that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

This sentence seems to speak directly to the *humaniora* and invites us to discuss values regarding people’s needs, preserving resources for future generations and justice. The debate on values creates a foundation for aligning actions with values – walking the talk. But then again, we know what humans are like. People are not necessarily willing to put their own interests aside, not even to ensure the living conditions of future generations. A sanction mechanism and organised coercion are necessary, alongside individual and communal value-based actions, for us to manage the great challenges that we face.

Often, this means the juridification of these challenges. For example, companies first started to pursue the green transition voluntarily according to the laws of the market economy when they noticed that it improves their financial performance. However, some companies chose to merely try to appear green, a practice known as greenwashing. The legislators of the European Union interfered and banned green marketing without proof. But before reaching this point, we needed a lot of research in the humanities and social sciences on human behaviour, the mechanisms underpinning the formation of perceptions and the logic of purchase decisions. Although green scepticism also rose among consumers, it was not enough to force companies to give up their misleading marketing and making false green claims for financial gain. Nowadays, companies are more often required to undergo a real green transition in their operations and their value chains.

In their book *Aika haastaa humanistit* (2023), Professor Tuomas Heikkilä and

Academician of Science Ilkka Niiniluoto argue that humanists play an important role in addressing our greatest challenges. “Climate warming and biodiversity loss are collective harms caused by human actions. They are the frequently unintended consequences of the choices made by states, cities, companies and citizens. That is why, in order to prevent them, we need knowledge in the human sciences on the preconditions for human rationality and moral responsibility.”¹

I myself also believe that the humanities, including philosophy, history, languages, theology and law, which can be classified as part of the humanities in a broader sense, can help humanity gain the understanding necessary for ethical choices and actions. It all comes down to strengthening the understanding and knowledge that serves as the basis for knowledge-based decision-making and choices, both in terms of societies and the individual. The key idea is that decisions are made not based on ideology, but knowledge. Knowledge is not used selectively to justify an existing political position, but knowledge is what drives decision-making.²

However, since the sum of all the rationality and moral responsibility in humans and humanity is not enough nor has it been enough to prevent climate change and biodiversity loss, we need social coercion alongside education, instruction and voluntariness. This is implemented in constitutional states by a democratically elected legislative body, together with courts of law and a law enforcement system that enforce the provisions.

Although the position of the traditional discipline of law as a field of study in the humanities can be disputed, it is worth noting that, due to climate litigation, it is gaining an important role in ensuring sustainable development. A major milestone was

reached when the European Court of Human Rights ruled against Switzerland in the case Verein KlimaSeniorinnen Schweiz and Others v. Switzerland (judgement issued on 9 April 2024). The Court found it to be a matter of fact that there are sufficiently reliable indications that climate change exists, and that it poses a serious current and future threat to the enjoyment of human rights. The Court also noted that states are aware of this and capable of taking measures to address the issue effectively, and that the threat is projected to be lower if the rise in temperature is limited to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. The Court called for urgent and effective action to combat climate change.

All available knowledge should be harnessed to address climate change and other great challenges. There have been times

when knowledge in some area of the humanities has been deemed useless. The uselessness and importance of knowledge is always assessed on the basis of existing information and values — but: everything flows. There is no such thing as useless knowledge.³ Knowledge that is considered useless or redundant may not only prove valuable later but also inspire contemporary researchers even in an entirely different field. Sources of inspiration should not be underestimated.

The purpose of highlighting the significance of the humanities is not to prove our self-worth, but to genuinely lend the knowledge of the *humaniora* – if not ancient then at least the knowledge accumulated since the time of Socrates – on the past and present of humanity for the benefit of future generations.

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¹ Heikkilä, Tuomas & Niiniluoto, Ilkka (ed.) 2023: *Aika haastaa humanistit*. Puheenvuoroja humanistisen tutkimuksen puolesta, pp. 30–31. Gaudeamus.

² Jaakko Kuosmanen 2023: Tietopohjainen päätöksenteko ja humanistien supervoimat. In *Aika haastaa humanistit*, p. 189. Ed. Tuomas Heikkilä & Ilkka Niiniluoto.

³ This topic has recently been discussed e.g. by Saarikivi, Taina & Saarikivi Janne 2022: *Turhan tiedon kirja – Tutkimuksista pois jätettyjä sivuja*. 2nd edition. SKS Kirjat.