

An unbiased reader, opening one of their books and then asking himself whether this is a tone of a thinker wanting to instruct or that of a charlatan wanting to impress, can't be in any doubt for more than five minutes; here everything smells of dishonesty... From every page and every line, there is an endeavour to beguile and deceive the reader, first by producing an effect to dumbfound him, then by incomprehensible phrases and sheer nonsense to stun and stupefy him, and again by audacity of assertion to puzzle him, in short, to throw dust in his eyes and mystify him as much as possible.

—Arthur Schopenhauer

WHAT IS ACADEMIA FOR?

by Alain de Botton

The popular acclaim for Alan Sokal's *Intellectual Impostures* suggests a deep-seated suspicion about the value of much theoretical work in the humanities. But if the heroic age of scholarship is past, what are the humanities for? To teach us how to lead better lives?

The oldest and most widespread view of academics is that they are really a bit odd. They often have large foreheads, old-fashioned footwear and high-pitched laughs. Something about their intelligence seems to interfere with their ability to deal with aspects of ordinary existence. Mastery of the details of agrarian reform under Tiberius or of Greek imagery in Keats's letters leaves them ill-equipped to apply sun cream or order a pizza. So entrenched is this portrait of the scholar that the adjective "academic" has acquired a dual connotation, both "from a university" and "redundant, pedantic, overcomplicated."

However much fun it can be to lampoon academics, cheap laughs at their expense obscure real questions about their role and the purpose of scholarship in general. These questions have been around since at least the 16th century, when Rabelais ridiculed the scholars of Paris university in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, accusing them of the sins with which scholars have been charged ever since: writing needlessly obscure books, ignoring simple truths, teaching nothing of value and abusing the respect of the population.

Even though huge numbers of students sign up to study at universities every year, we should not assume that these problems have vanished. Many academics continue to adhere to a vision of scholarship which appears baffling (and at times laughable) to otherwise sober and judicious people beyond university walls and, more significantly, fails to tally with the expectations of students. The doubts are not directed at all sectors of the academy. It is those scholars in the humanities, in departments of English, history, philosophy, modern languages and the classics who are the chief targets of complaints. The other-worldliness of scientists is more readily excused by their capacity to send men to the moon and to cure tuberculosis.

In recent years, a focus of complaint has been the way academics write. The output of university presses shows that large numbers of scholars in the humanities have been seduced by the technical prose-style pioneered by leading French academics in the 1960s and 1970s, loosely referred to as “post-modernism.” Opponents argue that this style is a sham designed to make readers feel more stupid and writers cleverer than they are—and no critic has been more vociferous about this than the American physicist, Alan Sokal. Last year, Sokal wrote a now infamous article parodying post-modernists’ use of scientific and technical language, entitled “Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a transformative hermeneutics of quantum gravity.” He sent it to the American journal *Social Text*, which published the paper in all seriousness, unable to distinguish deliberate nonsense from material normally submitted by academics. Sokal then followed up the article with a book (co-written with Belgian physicist Jean Bricmont) called *Intellectual Impostures* (Profile Books) which considered the work of prominent French academics including Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. The book set out to convince us that these authors were intellectual buffoons, guilty of using obscure scientific terms with no grasp of their meaning, in order to seem profound and get famous.

“An unbiased reader, opening one of their books and then asking himself whether this is a tone of a thinker wanting to instruct or that of a charlatan wanting to impress, can’t be in any doubt for more than five minutes; here everything smells of dishonesty... From every page and every line, there is an endeavour to beguile and deceive the reader, first by producing an effect to dumbfound him, then by incomprehensible phrases and sheer nonsense to stun and stupefy him, and again by audacity of assertion to puzzle him, in short, to throw dust in his eyes and mystify him as much as possible.”



Arthur Schopenhauer
(1788-1860)

This is not, in fact, Sokal and Bricmont writing about Lacan, Baudrillard and Deleuze; rather, it is Schopenhauer writing about Hegel, Fichte and Schelling in his *Parerga and Paralipomena* of 1851. But Sokal and Bricmont are saying much the same thing.

Why do human beings have such an appetite for obscurity? Friends of dense works argue that the difficulty merely reflects the complex subject matter: if a work is written in language more or less impassable to a lay reader, it is because its subject is difficult to grasp. Hegel would have claimed that it was impossible to articulate the phenomenology of spirit in the language of the daily paper; Lacan would have said that you couldn’t articulate a theory of phallic interpretation and paternal metaphor without a degree of technical language. The complexity of form is an inevitable consequence of the complexity of content.

Perhaps because so many important subjects present challenges to the intellect, do not reveal their secrets when skip-read in the bath, it is natural that an association should be formed between what is difficult and what is serious. Science presents the best example of ideas which are both hard to understand and still correct; it is in part due to our awe of the powers of science that we may form a general belief that the more obscure a book, the more profound it must be. Which is, of course, only half-true: difficulty is not a necessary and sufficient condition of greatness, although it has often been associated with it. How easy, then, to exploit the ambiguity, playing on the prestige of difficulty without having earned the right to it.

Career anxieties may play a part in this exploitation. So long as people are impressed by difficulty, then, for academics, being difficult will retain its status as a passport to better jobs, salaries and offices. Moreover, in an academic environment in which you are constantly pressured to write more books, being hard to understand at least offers protection against having nothing much to say. Few readers will have a dictionary large enough to find out that there is a problem—and even then, intellectual masochism may restrain us from blaming the author.

One of the finest critiques of academic obscurity was written a few decades after Rabelais's death by the French essayist, Michel de Montaigne. In his *Essays*, Montaigne liked to remind his readers how lazy he was. Long periods of reading were not to his taste, he said; he lost the thread in complex arguments; his concentration was fragile; his patience thin. "I would very much love to grasp things with a complete understanding but I cannot bring myself to pay the high cost of doing so... I am not prepared to bash my brains for anything, not even for learning's sake however precious it may be. From books all I seek is to give myself pleasure by an honourable pastime... If I come across difficult passages I never bite my nails over them: after making a charge or two I let them be... If one book wearies me I take up another."

This was, of course, playful posturing by a man with a thousand volumes on his bookshelf, an intimate knowledge of Greek and Latin philosophy and an encyclopaedic understanding of Christian theology. But if Montaigne exaggerated his laziness, delighting in presenting himself as a dim-witted country gentleman always ready to fall asleep when things got tough in Epicurus, or if Seneca used long words, this was disingenuity with a purpose. The

declarations of laziness and slowness were tactical ways of undermining the worth of obscure books.

Montaigne's suggestion was that, carefully used, boredom might be an indispensable guide to assessing the merit of books. Although it could never be a sufficient judge, dextrous use of boredom was helpful in correcting an otherwise excessive tolerance for balderdash. Those who did not listen to their boredom, like those who paid no attention to pain, were at risk of ending up in trouble. Excessive generosity allowed works to gain currency which well-applied laziness would more justly have debarred.

Beneath the critique, Montaigne was making an unusual suggestion: that there were no legitimate reasons why a work should be difficult, that the subject matter of philosophy (and, by implication, of the humanities in general)—unlike that of medicine or astrology—did not require the specialized vocabulary which rendered works impassable to lay readers.

“Just as in dress it is the sign of a petty mind to seek to draw attention by some personal or unusual fashion, so too in speech; the search for new expressions and little-known words derives from an adolescent schoolmasterish ambition. If only I could limit myself to words used in Les Halles in Paris.”

But writing with simplicity requires courage; there is a danger of being dismissed as simple-minded by those who consider an impassable prose style to be the only hallmark of intelligence. Montaigne's work can be read as a plea to take others seriously even when their language is unthreatening and their ideas clear—and to refrain from considering ourselves as fools if our own vocabulary happens to be no larger than that of a melon seller in Les Halles.

But linguistic obscurity is not the only—or indeed the most trenchant—charge we might level against academics. The enthusiasm for mocking certain academics, evident in the popularity of *Intellectual Impostures*, suggests that the public has a broader range of gripes. Perhaps the bluntest question we could ask of many academic works is what exactly they are for. Unfortunately, the question has too often been asked by people disinclined to believe that any activity can be justified without a concrete, preferably financial result, a 7 per cent per annum yield or an increase in the general health of the population. Measured against such criteria, scholarly work—and indeed most artistic work—seems a waste of time.

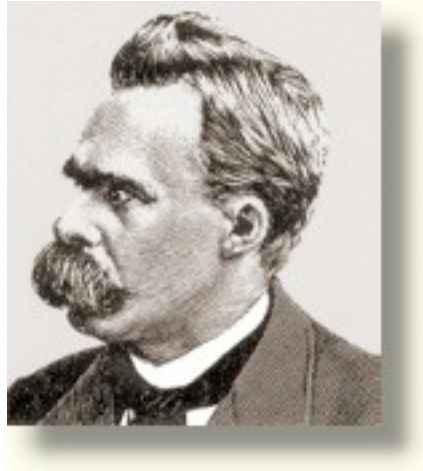
Nevertheless, the question of purpose can arise even among less practically-minded people when they discover the sort of subjects and the working methods of many academics, their enthusiasm for monographs on the most esoteric areas, their commentaries on texts which have already been interpreted a thousand times before. The standard scholarly answer is that knowledge justifies itself, that there is no further goal which it must serve; to suggest otherwise is to set foot on a slippery slope at the bottom of which lie vulgar materialist arguments.

This leaves many people unconvinced. In search of a more noble, yet still in some way useful vision of what scholarship is for, we might turn to Nietzsche's essay "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," written in 1873. Nietzsche begins by quoting a sentence by Goethe: "I hate everything that merely instructs me without augmenting or directly invigorating my activity," then indicates that history should help us to live: "We need history, certainly, but we need it for reasons different from those for which the idler in the garden of knowledge needs it... We need it for the sake of life and action... We want to serve history only to the extent that history serves life: for it is possible to value the study of history to such a degree that life becomes stunted and degenerate—a phenomenon we are now forced to acknowledge."

According to Nietzsche, history could inspire us to emulate certain deeds. The Renaissance could be studied for practical tips by anyone seeking to recreate the conditions of that great age: "Supposing someone believed that it would require no more than a hundred men educated and actively working in a new spirit to do away with the bogus form of culture which has just now become the fashion in Germany, how greatly it would strengthen him to realize that the culture of the Renaissance was raised on the shoulders of just such a band of a hundred men." Likewise, we could study the lives of great individuals for guidance on how to shape our character (a conception of history and biography put forward by Plutarch), or else read history as a compendium of mistakes we should avoid, or as a way of bolstering our sense of identity through an understanding of our origins.

Despite a certain naïveté of tone, Nietzsche was touching on something important. He was speaking from a position of authority; he wasn't a renegade who, having failed his secondary school exams, had built up a distaste for academia; at the time of writing this essay, he was a professor of philology at Basel university. He scandalized the academic community by arguing that the true task

of the classicist was not the disinterested study of the past, but “the better understanding of his own age by means of the classical world.” Nietzsche put his finger on a hope shared by almost everyone who arrives at university to study history, philosophy, the classics or literature; that their studies will in some way help them to live, will change their lives, will aid them to become better people. Yet no wish is more regularly frustrated and implicitly ridiculed by those in charge of universities.



Friedrich Nietzsche
(1844-1900)

People have complained about learning which lacks application to “life” since ancient times. Here, for example, is Epicurus talking about the right way to study philosophy, a view which, incidentally, philosophers employed by universities in Britain today would laugh at: “Vain is the word of a philosopher by which no mortal suffering is healed. Just as medicine confers no benefit if it does not drive away bodily disease, so is philosophy useless if it does not drive away the suffering of the mind... Let no one put off studying philosophy when he is young, nor when old grow weary of its study. For no one is too young or too far past his prime to achieve the health of his soul.”

The counter-argument to this Nietzschean-Epicurean line is that unless scholars are allowed to do painstaking and unglamorous work—work which involves collecting manuscripts, annotating texts, working out birth rates from parish records—then there will be no reliable body of history for people like Nietzsche to use for “life.” When confronted with the fruits of patient scholarship, the superb collections of letters of important people, the deciphering of ancient texts, the correct dating of objects, we can’t help but be impressed. (Consider the two-volume work on Hellenistic philosophy by AA Long and David Sedley, the collection of Schopen-

hauer's Manuscript Remains edited by Arthur Hübscher and the edition of Hobbes's correspondence by Noel Malcolm.)

Yet most scholars are not engaged in this kind of work. Indeed, the heroic age of scholarship (which started in about 1810) has in many ways ended: most letters have been catalogued, most texts deciphered, most lives written up conclusively. Scholars—still urged to produce books by their departments—merely resort to writing pedestrian commentaries which neither appeal to the general reader, nor make any ground-breaking advances in their field.

If much academic work in the humanities is regarded as parochial, it is also because of the enormous respect academics have for the texts of long-dead authors, as opposed to the themes with which these authors were themselves concerned. In an English department, you study what Keats thought of love, you do not try to understand love via Keats. In a classics department, you study Epicurus' thoughts on greed, not greed via Epicurus. The emphasis is on recovering exactly what Epicurus said, trying to understand precisely what Keats meant—with no thought that this might ultimately be quite dull or mistaken. It is a culture of quotation.

To understand and gently question this, we might again turn to Montaigne. His century witnessed an explosion of interest in the texts of ancient Greece and Rome. After hundreds of years of neglect, the intellectual elites of Europe decided that the greatest thinking had occurred in the minds of a handful of geniuses in the city states of Greece and in the Italian peninsula between the fall of Troy and the sack of Rome; there could be no greater scholarly priority, therefore, than a patient understanding of their works and their dissemination among the widest possible audience. Books which had languished in monasteries or libraries at last received attention. It became an act of intellectual good taste and the ultimate stamp of authority to back up any assertion with a quote indicating that an ancient philosopher, Plato or Lucretius, agreed with you; had said something similar in Greek or Latin on a parchment scroll in Athens or Rome centuries before. Meanwhile, in the universities it became an established part of a scholarly career to devote oneself to producing commentaries on the ancient texts, attempting ever more faithful accounts of their wisdom. Writing books about books.

Montaigne was marked by these developments. He quoted Plato 128 times in the *Essays*, Lucretius 149, Seneca 130. Those whom we quote often seem to express our very own thoughts, yet

with a clarity and psychological accuracy we cannot match. They know us better than we know ourselves. What was shy and confused within us is unapologetically and cogently phrased in them (our pencil-lines in the margin indicating where we have found a piece of ourselves). We invite these strangers into our diaries or books as a homage for reminding us of who we are.

But there may be more prosaic motives for quoting. We may know exactly what we wish to say—and yet be so reluctant to face public criticism were we to say it ourselves that we opt to hire others to speak for us. Aware that he would be censured for some of his statements, more because he was still alive than for anything inherently wrong with his words, Montaigne admitted that he wished to take shelter beneath the reputations of long-dead authorities. Those tempted to mock him (after all, these were the 1580s and the world did not yet know that Montaigne would one day be Montaigne), would have to risk contradicting names they professed to revere.



Michel De Montaigne
(1533-1592)

“I have made a concession to the taste of the public with borrowed ornaments which accompany me... If I had had confidence to do what I really wanted, I would have spoken utterly alone, come what may.” The tension between heeding to tradition and speaking “utterly alone” is central to the intellectual journey we call education, its successful resolution a delicate balancing act between two unpleasant alternatives: too much respect for the past, and you end up a parrot; too careless a departure, and it is shallow rebellion.

It was the first danger that Montaigne was particularly alive to, because—like the bookish of every century—he was awed by the rich tradition into which he had been born. Our earliest experiences are always of knowing less than others, of looking up at intellectual masters. Only the pathologically arrogant would manage not to suf-

fer from an intellectual inferiority complex standing in front of bookshelves, a fraction of whose contents we despair of ever digesting. But though the inferiority complex may be ubiquitous, it can be resolved in a variety of ways.

Montaigne is an example and a guide because he was honest both about his sense of inferiority and its resolution. Gradually he began to doubt the fashion for following the masters of the literary and philosophical canon, for allowing others always to determine the boundaries of his intellectual foraging. A meeting in Italy focused his thoughts: “In Pisa I met, in private, a decent man who is such an Aristotelian that the most basic of his doctrines is that the touchstone and the measuring-scale of all sound ideas and of each and every truth lie in conformity with the teachings of Aristotle... Aristotle has seen everything, done everything.” Which was not entirely untrue. Of all great intellectual figures, Aristotle was perhaps the most comprehensive; his works ranged over the full landscape of knowledge and an acquaintance with his work would be invaluable in any process of education. But there might also come a time when Aristotle would begin to impede the education he had done so much to foster. Like many great authorities, he was almost too clever for our own good; having greatly advanced human knowledge, he had unwittingly acquired the power to hold it back. Having acted as an intrepid tour guide, leading us into terrain we would never have explored on our own (logic, the reproductive systems of snails), we risked acquiring a dependence on him which would make us look nervously around us at all times to see whether he was still approving of us.


Successful intellectual inquiry always requires an intelligent gamble with irreverence: what made Aristotle interesting was that he himself doubted much of the knowledge that had been built up earlier—not by refusing to read Plato or taking a look at Heraclitus, but by mounting a critique of their weaknesses premised on a knowledge and appreciation of their strengths. To act in a truly Aristotelian spirit—as Montaigne realized and the man from Pisa did not—meant coming to intelligent disagreements with him.

Montaigne urged a move from commenting on the works of others to writing the sort of work that might be commented on; a move from being a commentator to being an author. “There are more books on books than on any other subject: all we do is gloss each other. All is a-swarm with commentaries: of authors there is a dearth.” By authors he meant people who did not simply report what others had said; they created arguments and wrote things

which were worthy of being reported themselves. They did not leech on the views of others. Was there not something timid, unoriginal about the trend for quotation? “Invention takes incomparably higher precedence over quotation. This trend made us into little more than yapping birds: We know how to say, ‘This is what Cicero said’; This is morality for Plato’; ‘These are the ipsissima verba of Aristotle.’ But what have we got to say? What judgements do we make? What are we doing? A parrot could talk as well as we do.”

Montaigne’s arguments sound so sensible that it is hard to understand why they have never made a difference. Nor have Schopenhauer’s critiques or Nietzsche’s; nor—probably—will those of Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont. The universities seem to have an impressive ability to override the serious questions which have been leveled at them for centuries. The jokes have been the same since Rabelais’s day; the targets of the jokes have hardly changed.

But those who are offended by the obscurity of academic work in the humanities, who would like, with Nietzsche, to see scholarship serve “life,” who, with Montaigne, reject the mania for quotation, can clutch at one straw. Students in Britain are increasingly having to pay for their higher education themselves. Their ability to direct funds to certain institutions and withhold them from others means that their boredom will have important repercussions.

However naïve and immature these 18 year olds may be, their conception of the objectives of scholarship are, arguably, much closer to the views of Epicurus, Montaigne, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche than those of the collected vice-chancellors of the country. They may yet be heeded. 

Alain de Botton was born in Zurich, Switzerland in 1969 and educated in Switzerland and England.

*De Botton has written five books. His first novel, *Essays in Love* (entitled *On Love in the US*) was published in 1993. His second novel, *The Romantic Movement* was published in 1994. His third novel, *Kiss and Tell* was published in 1995. His fourth book (and first non-fiction title), *How Proust can change your life* was published in 1997—and was a bestseller in the US and UK. His books are published in twenty languages.*

His fifth book, [The Consolations of Philosophy](#), was published in the UK and US in April 2000. He has made a television documentary for British television which accompanies the book

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

Scott Mosenson

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

is published weekly for its members by the
CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS
Founded in 1990 by Mortimer Adler & Max Weismann
E-mail: TGIdeas@speedsite.com
Homepage: TheGreatIdeas.org
A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.
Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.