Over the past few decades, the number of students taking humanities subjects has steadily declined. The number of English majors in the United States has halved since 1990, while uptake of Philosophy courses has fallen by a third. In Ireland, as enrollment for arts courses has dropped, so have their minimum CAO point requirements. Governments and universities are funnelling investment away from the humanities and into STEM and business subjects. While underfunding has forced Trinity's School of English to reduce its undergraduate tutorials per term from 12, to 10, to 7, the university is currently investing in three different large-capital projects for STEM and business. This, even though Trinity consistently ranks higher for English Studies worldwide than for any STEM or business subject. The behaviour of third-level administrators is already replicated in the attitudes and decisions of parents and students. A question to a higher-education expert in a recent *Irish Times* article reads:

> My daughter will be attending the Higher Options careers advice event in the RDS this week. She wants to explore a range of arts degree programmes. Given the constant encouragement from government and industry to apply for courses in STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths), is she selling herself short?

This is one of many code-reds that there's a crisis in the humanities. And just as an economic crisis should inspire a change in economic policy, this situation should make us sit down and think. The strength of popular aversion to the humanities, combined with the aggression of governmental strategies to dismantle them, makes the crisis among the greatest that the humanities have faced since the Renaissance.

The humanities have nothing to offer a school-leaver who believes she should choose the degree that will give her the most secure job. To a government official, wondering why he should pay for someone to study Aristotle instead of training new entrepreneurs, the humanities have no case. Certainly, Aristotle can teach students to think critically. But compared to the sciences, which can build motorways and cure disease, and to business, which teaches someone to market and produce products that will bring money into the economy, 'critical thinking' and ponderous philosophising are near-useless skills.

The crisis in the humanities today is that they're not useful, not in the direct way that other subjects are. A useful graduate will either contribute to the economy or somehow make people materially better off. According to this definition, humanities faculties have tried to succeed by producing graduates who can write and think critically. The useful humanities graduate will be able to write clear Powerpoints for businesses and think creatively because of long days in college spent reading Joyce, the argument goes. This could well be right. However, it fundamentally relegates the humanities to a distinct third place in importance below business and the sciences. Worse, it would have us turn the humanities subjects into writing and critical-thinking courses, essentially technical subjects, bearing little relation to the disciplines from which they originated. Aristotle would be read no more, except by oddballs and scientists looking for a laugh.

There's nothing wrong with usefulness, in the literal sense of the word. But we've all settled on a different definition of usefulness than the one for which the humanities were designed, one that ignores their vital role in human thought. We need to challenge this definition and, more importantly, challenge the thinking behind it. It originates in a dangerous and dramatic reversal in how we in the West conceive of what it means to be a human being.

In the twenty-first century, we understand ourselves best as bodies and consumers. The great economic, anthropological, and scientific theories that inform the decisions of our governments take as their base assumption the idea that our minds and decisions are largely motivated by some combination of sex, self-interest, and social ideologies created by the powerful people who lived before us. Our governments prioritise the material well-being of citizens and exclude most other things. Marxist and Foucauldian ideological theories characterise language and culture as nothing more than weapons of the powerful. Game theory models, market-structure models, all-important

macroeconomic models; all build their calculations and predictions on the assumption that everyone's purpose in this world is to maximise their individual utility.

We've shifted from a concept of human-ness that gives ascendancy to the mind to one that subordinates the mind to the body. Ask yourself, what is sacred in a human being? We no longer have an answer. The word "sacred" even makes us slightly embarrassed, just like the words "divine" or "wisdom". Instead of imagining ourselves as made in the image of a God, we see in ourselves the image of an animal.

The best way for us to refocus our view of ourselves is by turning to the humanities. They're the only group of disciplines capable of setting current ideologies against past ones and revealing our common-sense assumptions to be as shallow and contingent as they really are. The more that we subscribe to the reductionist view of human nature and cull whatever isn't useful, the more we obscure our path of escape from that very mode of thought.

I say all of this as a kind of preface, a way of allowing myself to say what I think about Dante Alighieri and his masterpiece, *The Divine Comedy*, and how it relates to the modern condition of the humanities. Now more than ever we should read Dante. Not patronisingly, as we read so many texts from the past, but as our contemporary. We should read Dante as someone whose poem would be of near-equal value if it had been written last week or last year. Not only is this possible, but it should be done, without making any excuses for him and with no qualifications except that to do this we must let go of our own temporal nativism.

I make this claim about Dante despite having no religious faith, very limited Italian, and no claim of expertise in the ins-and-outs of 13th-century Europe. Dante is about as distant from me as any writer I've ever read. He can be boring, often factually incorrect, and sometimes shockingly unempathetic in his treatment of others. But it's because his thinking is so antithetical to our own that, when it finds the right words, it speaks with incredible force. The verses roll on, canto after canto, and carry us on a journey designed to reveal our own souls to us.

Dante's *Comedy* contains views of the world and humanity's place in it that underpinned the establishment of the *studia humanitatis*: the studies of humanity. The original *studia humanitatis* were grammar, rhetoric, history, poetry, and moral philosophy. All, incidentally, have a corresponding domain in Dante's *Paradiso*. The story of the humanities is long and complicated, and the golden generation of Italian humanist thinkers would come after Dante, but both they and he believed that the purpose of the humanities was to cultivate the parts of oneself that are sacred. With intense study and reflection, we can refine our ability to reason, separate our will from our desires, and connect more deeply to the beauty of God's created world.

This is really an Augustinian idea. Today we imagine that faith and belief are the same thing, but for these thinkers faith isn't a kind of thought. It arises from our contact with the universe like a spark from flint. Through faith, we can embrace the natural beauty and order of the universe, move with it like two wheels in equal motion, and then create a substance which Dante says to St. Peter is an "argomento de le non parventi", a "proof for the things not apparent". The humanities were for making minds stronger and, ultimately, for the study of beauty.

I say Augustinian, but Dante barely mentions Saint Augustine. The core framing of the *Comedy* instead follows the model offered by Dante's last guide, the medieval theologian St. Bernard of Clairvaux. Clairvaux was a key proponent of contemplation, a concept developed by his friend Hugh of Saint Victor, which was essentially a schematisation of the process Saint Augustine describes in the Confessions. We first examine ourselves for the ways in which we have offended God, and atone for them, and then devote ourselves to an appreciation of God's grandeur through rigorous training of the various faculties of the mind. The idea is that we try to liberate the mind from the body and then set it upon the world. From one of St. Bernard's sermons:

> The first stage of contemplation … is to consider constantly what God wants, what is pleasing to him, and what is acceptable in his eyes. We all offend in many things; our strength cannot match the rightness of God's will and cannot be joined to it or made to fit with it. So let us humble ourselves under the powerful hand of the most high God and make an effort to show ourselves unworthy before his merciful gaze .... Thus having made some progress in our spiritual exercise under the guidance of the Spirit who gazes into the deep things of God, let us reflect how gracious the Lord is and how good he is in himself.

Fall first, and then rise. For Dante, contemplation is a process of descent and ascent, most explicitly in Cantos XXI and XXII of *Paradiso*, where we see the contemplative souls climbing up and down Jacob's Ladder. The whole structure of the *Comedy* follows St. Bernard's model. A plumbing of the depths of human evil and injustice, followed by a cleansing, and finally an ascent imbued with the grandeur of God. The intellectual and the moral parts of the soul are equal in the *Comedy*. They are both parts of the soul.

The souls in Hell have all sinned either by putting greed and bodily desires before the mind or using the mind to deceive others and serve their own bodily self-interest. They're all unrepentant; Buonconte da Montefeltro, whom Dante encounters in Canto V of *Purgatorio*, is saved even after a life of sin, because he breathed with his last breath the name of Mary. The bar is low, but none of Hell's souls could clear it - so much so did sin enslave them.

It is freedom from sin that Dante seeks in *Purgatory*. The first character he and Virgil meet is Cato, the gatekeeper of Purgatory, the great Roman symbol of freedom. In Canto II they witness an angel on a barge depositing the new souls to the bottom of the mountain. "In exitu Israel de Aegypto", they sing; it is Psalm 113 in the Vulgate, celebrating the freedom of the Jews from slavery in Egypt. Purgatory ends with Dante becoming weightless, or 'puro e disposto a salire a le stelle' - 'pure and ready to ascend to the stars'. Dante seeks this liberation, too, in *Inferno*. The souls are tortured and dismembered, stung by insects or burning in fire, hacked apart by demons. Despite their mutilation, Dante finds that they're often eloquent and considered. They all want to be remembered. Their minds are what remain in them.

There's a famous verse of Dante's that puzzled me for quite a while, and I wanted to share my solution with you before we go back to thinking about the present, with its constant demands and valuations. In Canto XVII of *Paradiso*, Dante meets an ancestor, Cacciaguida, who prophecies his future exile from Florence. The verse:

Tu proverai come sa di sale

Lo pane altrui, e come è duro calle

Lo scendere e 'l salir per l'altrui scale.

You will found how much like salt

Is the taste of another man's bread, and how hard is the way

Going down and up another's stairs.

This is one of the most celebrated verses in the *Comedy*, but it doesn't seem to make much sense. Salt usually tastes good, and stairs aren't often difficult to climb. But pull back from the images and look at the tapestry of *Paradiso*. The poem repeatedly tells us, following the Gospel of John, that food for the body is inadequate because it will leave us hungry again, but food for the soul will fill us forever. The stairs, like the ladder, mirror the descent then ascent of contemplation; many translators mistranslate this, swapping 'ascent' and 'descent', but Dante puts them in this order for a reason. In the next verse he describes how Dante will "cadrai", fall in, with evil and ignorant people, people of

“bestialitate”, bestiality or animal-like savagery. Cacciaguida is saying that Dante’s exile will damage his soul. The essential comedic element of the *Comedy* is that its existence guarantees that despite this Dante’s soul will be saved. And so will ours, if we read him, and through some intense reading develop our minds enough that we can look cleanly upon the world.

It’s dangerous to talk of souls these days, because it causes people to take you less seriously. The poles of our thinking have flipped since Dante’s time, and almost no one wants to see things revert. I’ve had three conversations in the last few weeks with people from very different backgrounds who said that they wished Saint Augustine had never existed. They see people like Dante as world-haters, ashamed of themselves, warped, repressed and constricted in their thought. True, Saint Augustine’s ideas have caused a lot of damage; but if the planet continues to heat up then our ideas will do far more damage to this world than his. So maybe we shouldn’t be so quick to point fingers.

I’m not suggesting that we should all become Christians. Dante’s conception of humanity left out a lot of important things. However, we should realise that our current one does as well. The idea of the sanctity of the human mind has done more for civil rights and human dignity than any of the sciences. It was science that claimed that slaves come from a different species, that women and certain races are innately inferior, that homosexuality is a psychological disorder. It was the Puritan colonists of America, on the other hand, who most vociferously opposed slavery, and Baptists in the South who gathered around Martin Luther King’s civil rights movement. All doctrines and ideologies can champion and degenerate the cause of human dignity.

Everywhere in the world there have always been people who believe they know everything, and who use that conviction to benefit themselves and hurt others. The concept of the sacred, the thing beyond comprehension in us all, has long been a check on their power to inflict suffering. It’s also driven people to do many terrible things. But so has everything else. No person or system of thought can ever fully have justice on their side.

Of all the people who have ever lived on earth, we are in the best position to see that. We have access to thousands of years of documented history and literature spanning the cultures of seven continents. And even then, we’re still destroying the humanities, our political systems, and the whole planet, because we imagine that we’re somehow better than all these things and have nothing to learn from them. As articulated by Dante, the humanities were originally a way of tying together the whole world in a tradition of faith, study and human dignity. Only the elites could use them fully, but almost everyone had some access to them, at festivals and in churches. Now, with the collapse of the soul as a major part of Western thought, we have lost all those things. For the people who want to save the humanities, to save the bedrock values of human dignity and liberty, there is one solution. We must ask, openly and without cynicism, if there is a way to reconcile the sacred with the human.