

To Enlighten and Annoy

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Welcome to the inaugural issue of *Athenaeum Review*, a journal sponsored jointly by the School of Arts and Humanities and the Edith O'Donnell Institute of Art History at The University of Texas at Dallas. This initiative reflects and advances the commitment of our School to education that not only transcends traditional disciplinary boundaries but also seeks to create productive connections between the humanities and the creative arts, the arts and humanities with the natural sciences, and the university with the greater community.

What is the focus of *Athenaeum Review*? A reasonable place to start is with Albert Einstein, the scientist/artist/humanist who radically changed the way we think about the universe. Exactly one hundred years ago, in remarks celebrating the physicist Max Planck's 60th birthday, Einstein suggested that every human being constructs "a simplified and intelligible picture of the world" and then "tries to some extent to substitute this constructed cosmos for the world of experience, and thus to overcome it." This, he argued, is an urge common to "the painter, the poet, the speculative philosopher, and the natural scientist." Later thinkers have provided alternate versions of the same basic idea – that each person create a personal frame for interpretation that deeply influences how we experience and invest life with meaning. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz described humans as animals "suspended in webs of significance that we ourselves have spun." For Geertz, the fabric composed of these webs is the "culture" (or cultures) in which we live. The contemporary philosopher Charles Taylor called the fabric formed by these webs the "social imaginary."

The term, as I understand it, refers to a process that involves imagination and assumption more than thought and theory. Stories, shared memories, history and self-congratulatory “mythistory” play a large role in determining “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others...the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.” America today is characterized by a conflict of social imaginaries – or perhaps by people inhabiting different conceptual universes. The divergent bordering on violent opinions concerning statues and memorials dedicated to recalling the Civil War (or, viewed through a different frame, the War Between the States) serves as a local case in point.

Einstein’s formulation suggests another implication of this “imagined” cosmos that guides our behavior, expectations and interpretations. He wrote elsewhere that “all religions, arts and sciences aspiring to ennoble human existence are branches of the same tree.” All three emerge from the same innate human yearning for life to make sense. In other words, the cosmos we create and the webs that we weave result from a convergence of all three ways of making sense of experience. While those engaged in each of the three grand branches of human understanding (the arts, humanities and science) seek to create a picture of the world, each branch is inadequate by itself to make our experience both intelligible and meaningful.

Athenaeum Review is dedicated, then, to exploring the dynamic interaction of the humanities, arts and sciences that creates these various frames for interpretation. The content of each issue will be diverse and wide-ranging. The current issue includes articles and book reviews on politics, food, the interaction of science and art, Science Fiction, Christian Historical Fiction, the Chautauqua Movement, and the worldview of indigenous peoples. We are not writing primarily for specialists or other academics. Our goal is to present ideas of importance to readers who are educated, inquisitive and perhaps skeptical of what takes place at universities. What matters is that they share our fascination with the ways that human beings create individual versions of the cosmos, spin webs of significance, and create the “social imaginaries” that shape their response to life.

It is our expectation that a diversity of subjects, perspectives and readers will generate new insights and ideas. As the historian William McNeill noted, historically the most profound cultural developments have resulted from interactions with strangers who possess new and unfamiliar skills, knowledge and perspectives. My colleague Rainer Schulte pioneered the use of literary translation as a model for cross-cultural communication, that is, communication across any barrier to understanding – not just language but also age, gender, time or academic discipline. He insisted that his workshops on

the practice of literary translation include participants working on at least three different languages. Discussions in single-language workshops, he had learned, inevitably devolve into minor, often obscure points. As a participant, I was forced to explain my translation choices to others not expert in the language. I was more likely, as a result, to see them in larger, more significant literary and cultural contexts. Think of *Athenaeum Review* as an extension of that model.

2018, being the centennial of Einstein's observation, strikes me as an especially auspicious year and The University of Texas at Dallas an ideal place to create such a journal. "Auspicious" may, I admit, seem an overly optimistic interpretation of the current situation – especially in light of the increasing fragmentation of society and the current dominance of discipline-specific education that emphasizes the acquisition of immediately marketable skills and economic "success" at the expense of broad-based knowledge and the elusive goal of "wisdom." UT Dallas, moreover, since its founding in 1969, has emphasized research and education in the collection of fields known as STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics). The reputation of the University for excellence in STEM fields has obscured public awareness of the quality of our programs in the creative arts and humanities.

Despite these obstacles, the condition of the educational cosmos, at least as I imagine it, is not as dire as it seems. There are encouraging signs that the balance of educational emphasis – now tilted dangerously away from the liberal arts – is beginning to shift. The most encouraging support has come from an unexpected quarter: Earlier this year the National Academics of Science, Engineering and Medicine jointly published a report urging education that integrates the sciences, engineering and mathematics with the arts and humanities. That report takes its title - *Branches of the Same Tree* - from the statement by Einstein that I cited earlier. I see signs of a growing recognition that individuals and organizations must integrate the three great processes of understanding – scientific, artistic and humanistic – if individuals and organizations are to respond adequately, creatively and ethically to the possibilities and problems of the twenty-first century.

UT Dallas is, in fact, an ideal place to launch a journal designed to connect the university with a larger community of learners. A university dedicated to scientific discovery and technological innovation has a corollary obligation to examine the ethical and cultural implications of those discoveries and inventions. The School of Arts and Humanities has sought to fulfill that obligation through its interdisciplinary curriculum, through the cultural events that it offers to the public, and through the Centers/Institutes housed within the School:

- Center for Translation Studies
translation.utdallas.edu
- Ackerman Center for Holocaust Studies
utdallas.edu/ackerman
- Center for Values in Medicine, Science and Technology
utdallas.edu/c4v
- Confucius Institute
utdallas.edu/ah/confucius
- Edith O'Donnell Institute for Art History
utdallas.edu/arhistory
- Center for United States-Latin America Initiatives
utdallas.edu/ah/cuslai

The *Athenaeum Review* owes its existence to the support of these six interdisciplinary Centers/Institutes. Each has succeeded independently in gaining international recognition and attracting external funding. Each has collaborated successfully with the others. Each provides opportunities for advanced research by both undergraduates and graduate students. In 2017 the Directors gathered to discuss ways to build on that success, strengthen their interaction, and increase awareness of the benefits that engagement with the arts and humanities brings to the education of every individual. Among the results was the decision to reach beyond the boundaries of the campus by sponsoring a new journal, with the Dean and Directors serving as the editorial board. The name *Athenaeum Review* was adopted unanimously, since we regarded the journal as a natural complement to the bold ambition emerging from the founding of the Edith O'Donnell Institute for Art History to establish an Athenaeum (see *Whither Athenaeum?* by Dr. Brettell) on campus as a major step toward making the university a major force in cultural education and outreach.

We view this initiative as a stage in the continuing evolution of UT Dallas. It will enable us to extend the essential message of higher education to a larger audience: No idea, assumption or interpretation should ever be allowed (as the physicist Wolfgang Rindler has said of scientific theories) “to stagnate in complacency.” I hope that each reader encounters in every issue of *Athenaeum Review* reasons to be enlightened and annoyed. A

Sources

Readers will find more information about the ideas and quotations in this editorial are encouraged to consult the following:

Yehuda Elkana, "Einstein and God," In Peter L. Gallison et al., eds., *Einstein for the 21st Century* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008): pp.35-47

Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1983)

Wolfgang Rindler, *Essential Relativity: Revised Second Edition* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1977)

Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2004)

Branches From the Same Tree: The Integration of the Humanities and Arts with Sciences, Engineering and Medicine (Washington DC: The National Academies Press, 2018)