

Resilience, Flexibility, and Normativity: rethinking the role of the Arts and Humanities in the economy

James Robson, University of Oxford

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Outline of the argument

- A&H face criticism in policy contexts focused on economic purposes of HE
- Current ways of advocating for A&H degrees, though often rooted in orthodox economics fail to really connect with the criticism
- There needs to be a fundamental shift in the discourse and the mode of justifying A&H in HE.
- This involves reframing the economic purposes of HE by problematising orthodox assumptions around the nature and purpose of work and the role Humanities graduates can and should play in the economy
- The concept of narrative and 'narrative skills' has the potential to provide a new way into the debate and shift the discourse to the normative in a way that empowers students, practitioners and society and highlights the value of the humanities
- Watch out for logical acrobatics!





Arts and Humanities in crisis?

- The purposes and value of HE increasingly framed in economic terms:
 - Individual salary returns
 - Meeting employers' skills demands, increasing productivity, driving economic growth
- Returns on A&H degrees tend to be low
- Skills not always aligned to specific shortages (often technical and specific)
- Therefore, A&H facing increasing criticism, pressure and regulation
- Economic pressures from Covid (and wider issues) intensifying criticism



Key
Justifications
for the Value
of A&H

- **Intrinsic Value**
- **Individual Economic Value**
- **Public Economic Value**
- **Public Goods**



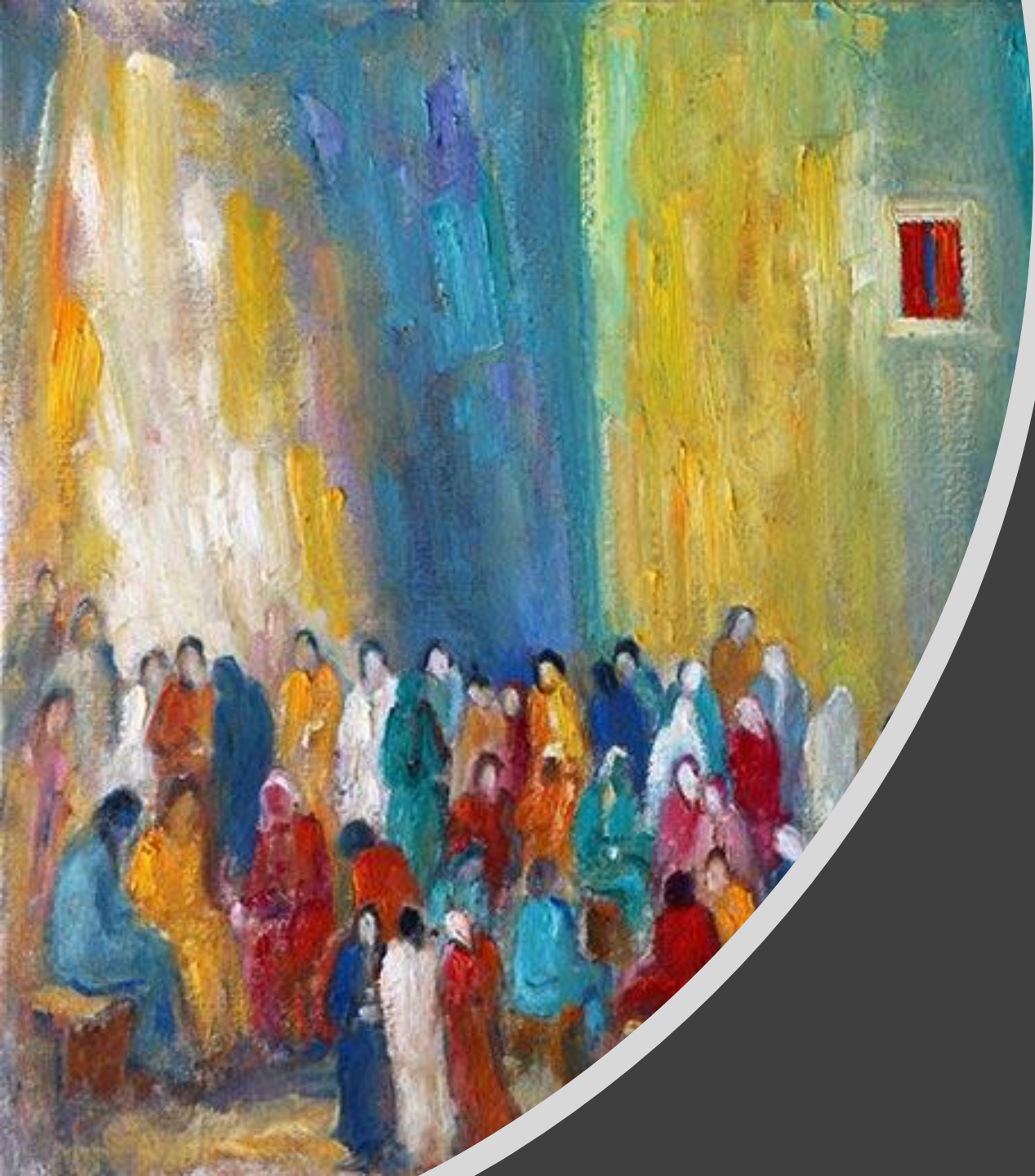
Intrinsic Value

- Often rooted in Newman's 'Idea of the University' which emphasise the intrinsic value of knowledge and education for its own sake
- The value of the humanities stand simply by virtue of their distinctive disciplinary characteristics and distinctive understanding of what constitutes knowledge (Small, 2013)
- The educational purposes of HE are more important than the economic purposes – inducting students into subject specific bodies of knowledge (Ashwin, 2020)
- Students want to study the humanities them is justification enough (Marginson, 2022)
- Valuable arguments, but inevitably resonate most with those in the humanities and simply avoid the economic critique

Individual/Private Economic Value

- Current instruments fail to capture career complexities
- Humanities degrees produce transferable skills that are actually valued in the labour market
- Financial returns to individuals are significant over longer term
- Born out by some research – e.g. Robson, et al 2020; Lyonette et al. (2017), BA, 2022: emphasise that arts and humanities graduates work in a variety of sectors and deploy a wide range of skills associated with their degrees in the labour market
- Although may not really compensate for credentialism and existing networks of privilege
- Highlights some of the criticism faced by Humanities degrees may be an artifact of wider issues – e.g. culture wars





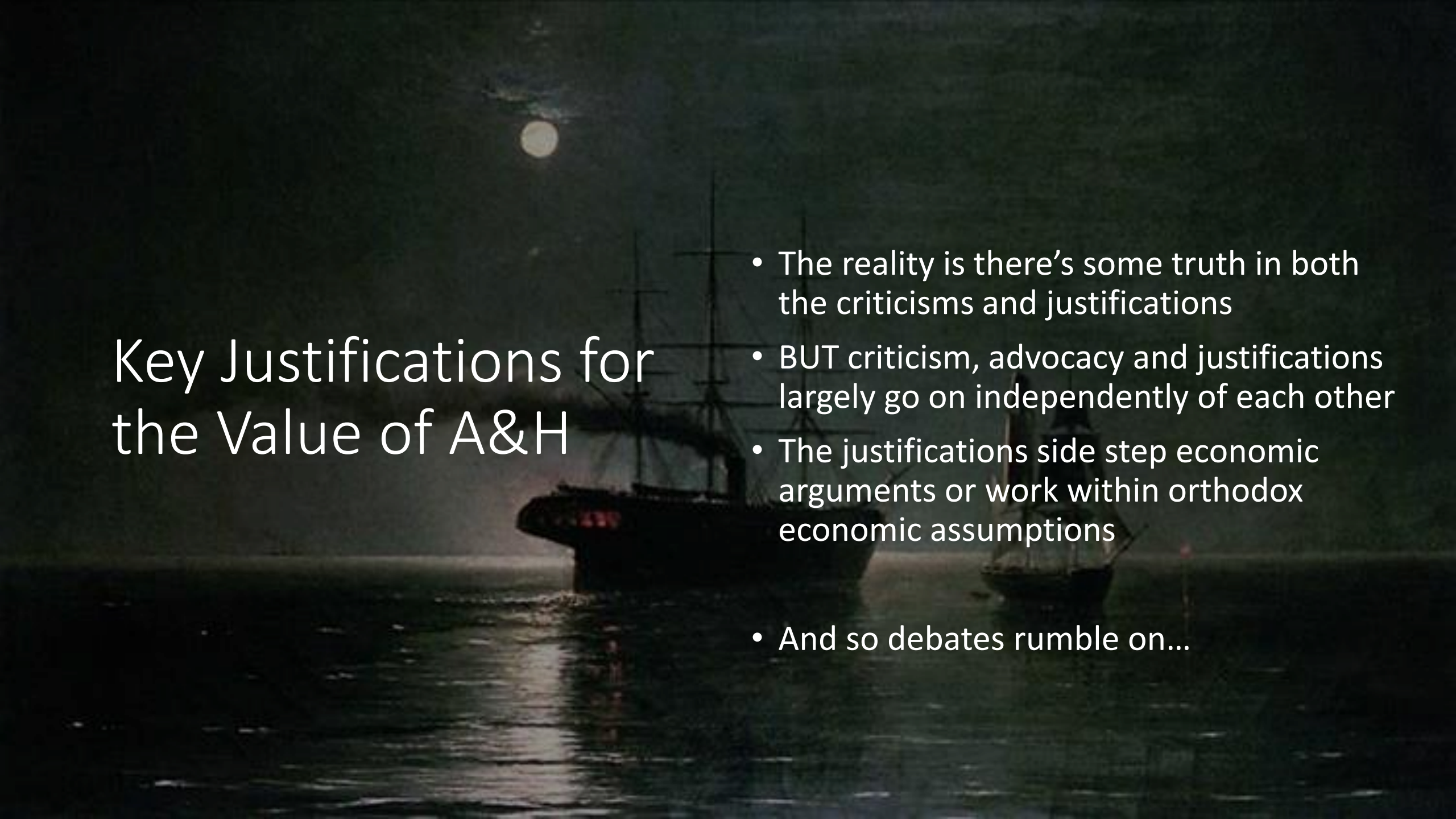
Public Economic Value

- Humanities skills/ transferable skills are needed (just lost in discourse of returns and poor skill modelling)
- Skill demand is there (Robson, et al., 2021)
- Humanities graduates make a massive economic contribution through the creative industries (AHRC 2010)
 - E.g. in UK, creative industries is the largest sector of the economy
 - Humanities graduates make up a significant part of the workforce of the sector
- Analysis has linked A&H to major economic activities through: film/ TV, theatre, books, game production, journalism, museums, libraries, heritage sites etc etc (AHRC, 2009a; AHRC 2009b; British Academy, 2008; Crossick and Kaszynska, 2016)
- Can be hard to link degree courses or work within universities specifically to much creative economic activity.
- Arguments can slip into general advocacy for A&H activities rather than A&H in HE



Broader Public Goods

- Analytical lenses for understanding the grand challenges in society – e.g. ethics of AI, history of geopolitics etc
- Critical friend to society
- Culture enriching society
- Celebrating diversity
- Preparing rounded citizens
- Again arguments can slip into general advocacy for A&H activities rather than A&H in HE



Key Justifications for the Value of A&H

- The reality is there's some truth in both the criticisms and justifications
- BUT criticism, advocacy and justifications largely go on independently of each other
- The justifications side step economic arguments or work within orthodox economic assumptions
- And so debates rumble on...



Shifting the Discourse: meaningful dialogue

- Acknowledges multiplicity of perspectives
- Acknowledges the central importance of the relationship between HE and the economy
- But problematizes reductive, orthodox economic discourses
- Provides a more nuanced account of the economic purposes of HE



Examining Economic Orthodoxy

- The orthodox economic purposes of HE are:
 - Private – to provide a positional labour market advantage, reflected in financial salary returns
 - Public – to meet employer skills needs, enhance productivity and drive economic growth
 - Broadly rooted in Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1963) and neoclassical economic assumptions
- Need to problematise embedded assumptions about
 - 1. the purpose of work
 - 2. economic growth

The purpose of work: Instrumentalism

- **Embedded assumptions:**
 - Work is conceptualised in instrumentalist terms as the key means by which individuals gain money to live
 - That the purpose of work is *only to earn a living*.
- **Classical economics:**
 - Work is '**disutility**', something people do for extrinsic reasons and would avoid it if they could. (Spencer 2009)
 - This understanding is rooted in Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, which argues that the humanity is prone to idleness: 'it is the interest of every man to live as much at his ease as he can' (Smith 2010: 760).
 - Work is 'toil and trouble' and workers would only engage in it, rather than act upon natural urges of indolence, if they were appropriately compensated through wages.
 - Only the allure of income motivates humans to work; without this no work would be done
- **Neoclassical economics**
 - Shifted the concept of pain cost to opportunity cost
 - Work is resisted by humans, but not because it causes pain, rather it denies the **pleasure of leisure**.
 - People will only give up leisure hours if appropriately compensated with wages
- **Post-war Chicago School (including HCT)**
 - Adopted neoclassical view of work but also emphasised **consumption** as key motivation of humans
 - Labour supply viewed merely in terms of rational choice with individuals balancing their time between work and leisure,
 - Humans want to maximise utility - profit, leisure and consumption



Purpose of Work in HE Policy

- Unpacking these assumptions show that in HE policy discourse work is framed in teleological and instrumental terms.
 - The purpose of work is the salary
- Importantly, humans are viewed purely as rational seekers of profit, leisure and consumption – **the neoliberal homo economicus** of Hayek, Friedman and Becker.
- Given the formative nature of education, it seems bizarre to have such a reductive view of work embedded in the economic purposes of HE, particularly given the implications for how we think about humanity



Alternative perspectives

- **Marx**
 - Work has meaning and importance in its own right and is the means by which humans express creativity and develop purpose (Marx, 1977)
 - Work is fulfilling. Work has intrinsic value. Work can be an end in its own right.
 - The problem with work under capitalism was 'alienated labour' and the power imbalances at the heart of the employment
- **Veblan**
 - Resisted the standard homo economicus model and argued that human progression was rooted in devotion to work and people's pursuit of 'useful effort' – what he referred to as the 'instinct of workmanship'
- **Arendt**
 - Developed the ancient Greek distinction between work and life
 - Differentiated the concepts of 'labour' and 'work': labour is the necessary work involved in maintaining human life – growing food, preparing food, cleaning, fixing, raising children etc. Work, in contrast, sets humans apart from other creatures. It is the act of creating something outside ourselves.
 - Humans should aspire to work – to be engaged in creative, purposeful activity sits at the heart of human thriving and human flourishing. This is what work is and what work should be
- **Sen and Nussbaum**
 - Capabilities to enable flourishing



Alternative perspectives

- **Weber and Neo-institutionalists**
 - Modern market-dominated economic order was created by innovative, disciplined, religiously motivated economic action – work rooted in the protestant ethic
 - Individuals today can no longer engage in such creative action. Instead, we are condemned to work for a living, often in narrowly defined specializations. And economic enterprises must continually strive to maximize profits and rationalize their production for the sake of efficiency or else fail. This is the present-day **iron cage** of institutionalized capitalism.
 - Is their room for agency?
- **Recent Political Economy and Sociology of Work**
- *Skidelsky and Craig (2020)*
 - Stress the importance of returning the ideas of **meaning and purpose** to work and creating conditions for people to **flourish** in employment
- *Pink (2019)*
 - Situated more in Business Studies
 - Humans yearn to do work in the service of something larger than oneself... [for] more than just a paycheck
 - Businesses need to structure themselves to reflect this
- *Graeber (2019)*
 - Writes about ‘Bullshit Jobs’
 - Emphasises the damage purposeless and pointless work can do to human flourishing and the basic human need to do something useful;
 - Need to decouple salary value from human value when talking about work



Humans seek meaning and purpose

- Traditional economics, and the orthodox economics of Human Capital Theory, hold that humans are motivated purely by the pursuit of happiness or utility.
- More nuanced views emphasise that it is not simply pleasure that motivates us, **'but the pleasure one derives from a fulfilling existences and the contribution that one makes to a bigger endeavour'** (Mayer, 2018:11).
- Most people's sense of identity, dignity and self-worth are linked with their work (Graeber, 2019)
- Humans are motivated by and desire to engage in worthwhile, *purposeful* activities and collective endeavours. **Humans desperately yearn for meaningful and purposeful work** (Spencer, 2009).
- Therefore, rather than fixating on graduate premia, financial returns, or even student employability, HE should focus on empowering students to engage in meaningful, purposeful work when they graduate.
- In normative terms, this understanding of work and what it means to be human should be embedded in the individual economic purposes of HE.





Growth?

- Public economic purpose: to meet labour market skills demands, improve productivity and drive economic growth
- Economic growth is, within so many contexts, unquestioned and taken for granted as a naturally desirable outcome, such that successful economies are expected to double GDP every 23 years!! (Binswanger, 2015)
- ‘Growthism, as we might call it, stand as one of the most hegemonic ideologies in modern history’ (Hickel, 2022: 21)
- Constant economic growth is a relatively new concept linked with a particular form of muscular capitalism organised deliberately around ever increasing levels of industrial production and consumption
- Rooted in the Chicago school neoliberal understanding of capitalism (see Hayek, 1944), summed up in the Friedman Doctrine, the very definition of **shareholder capitalism**:
 - ‘in a free-enterprise, private property system a corporate executive is an employee of the owners of the business. He has direct responsibility to his employers. That responsibility is to conduct the business in accordance with their desires, which generally will be **to make as much money as possible** while conforming to the basic rules of society...there is one and only one social responsibility of business – to use its resources and engage in activities designed to **increase its profits** so long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engages in open and free competition without deception or fraud’.



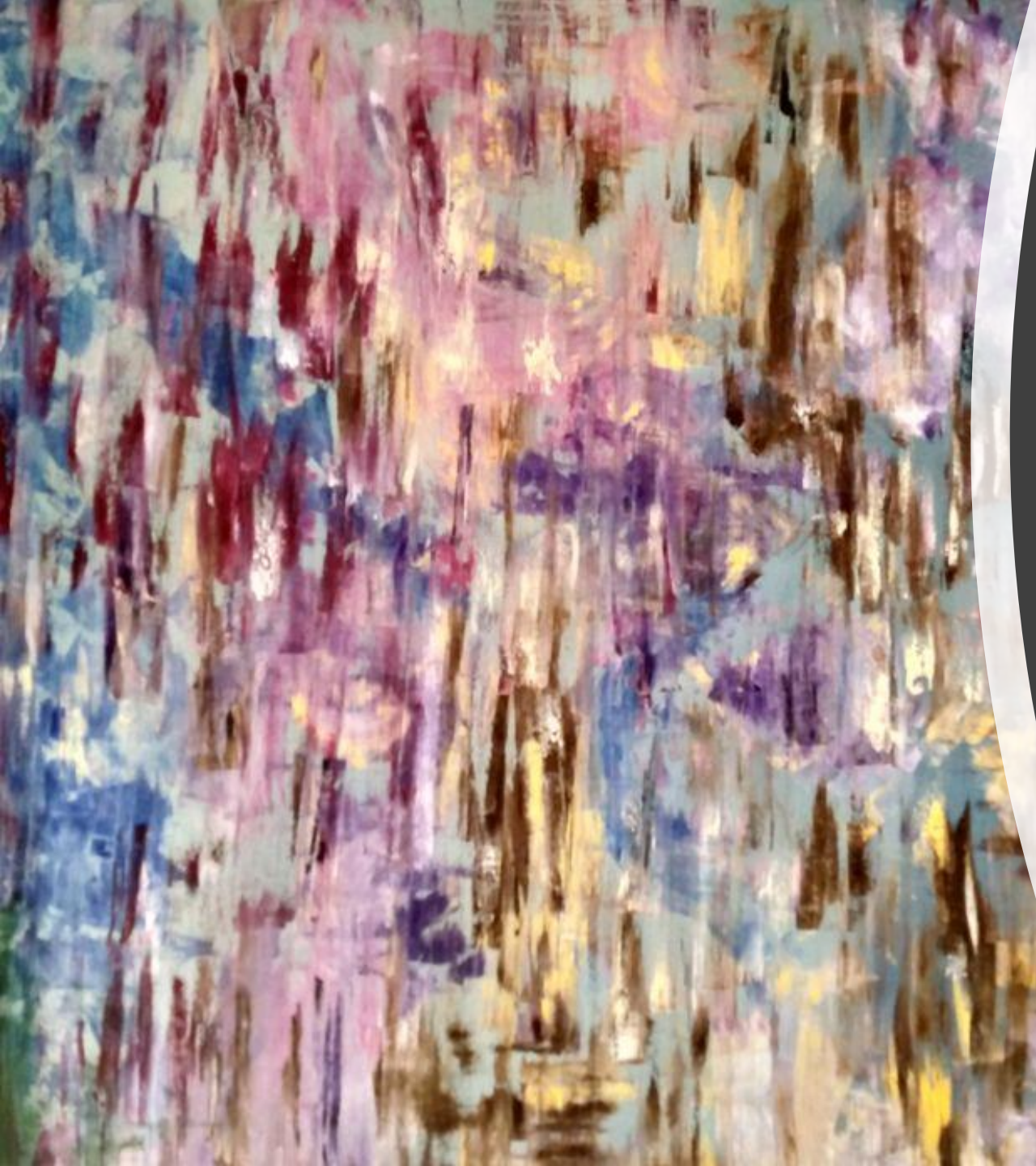
Growth?

- *'few social science theories are both so significant and misconceived as to threaten our very existence but that is precisely what the Friedman doctrine is doing in the twenty-first century'* (Mayer 2018:2)
- Emphasis on constant growth creates artificial barriers between the economy and the society in which it is embedded and legitimises greed and excesses at the expense of both society and the natural environment.
- The debate over the sustainability of economic growth is arguably the most important discussion of a generation.
- More and more heterodox economists, as well as general commentators, are emphasising the urgent need to reconcile our relentless drive towards economic growth with the limitations and constraints of a finite planet.
- Debates around: green growth, decoupling, degrowth, anti-growth...
- But the real question here is: *Why should modern HE position its public economic value in terms of such a fundamentally damaging understanding of the economy?*



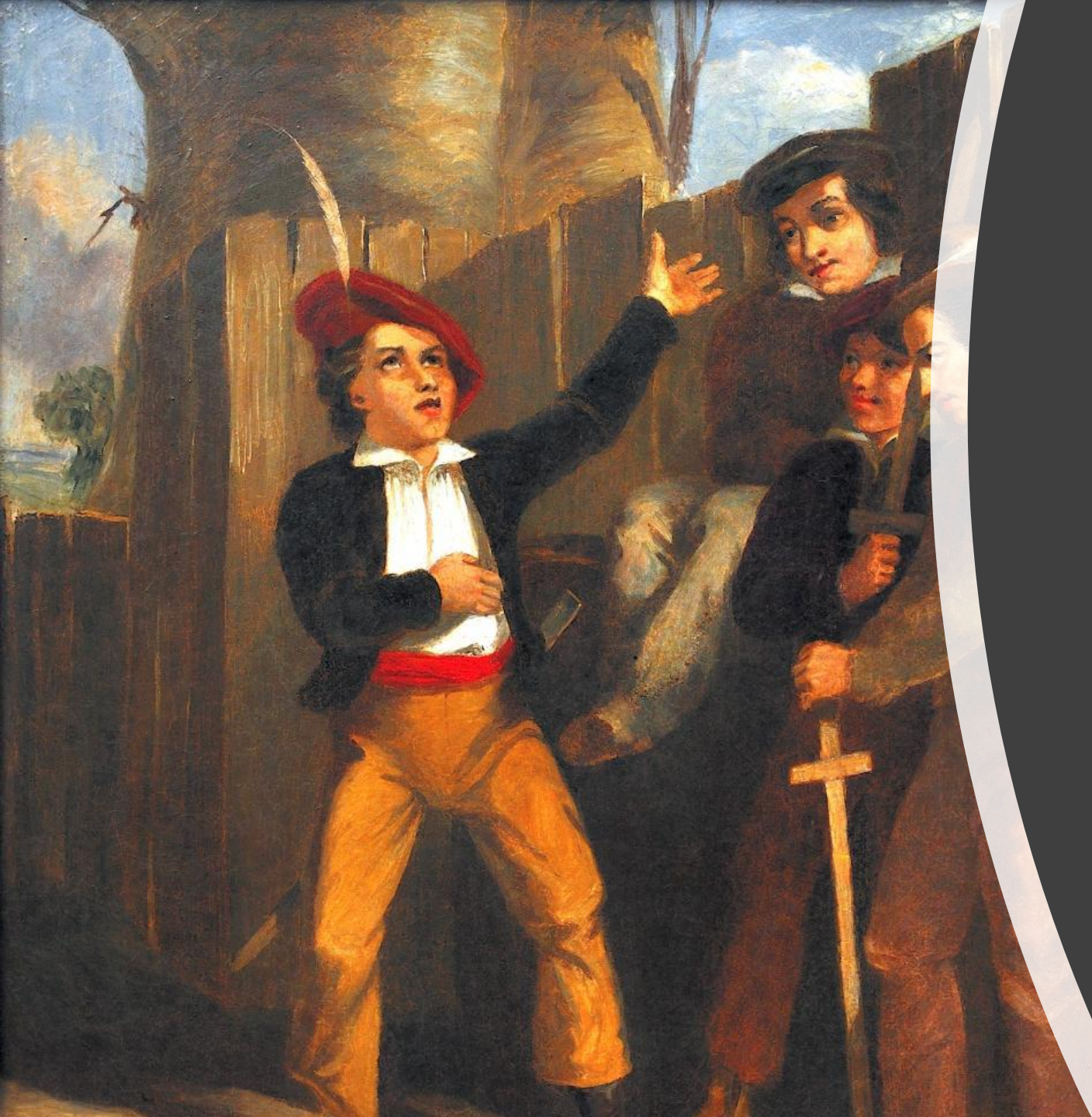
Prosperity?

- Rather than economic growth, and associated measures of GDP, Jackson (2017) has argued that we should overtly shift our language to a discussion of '**prosperity**'.
- Prosperity goes beyond material pleasures, transcending material concerns, and including quality of life, health, and happiness of individuals and wider society, rooted in relationships and community.
 - 'It is evidenced by our satisfaction at work and our sense of shared meaning and purpose. It hangs on our potential to participate fully in the life of society. Prosperity consists in our ability to flourish as human beings – within the ecological limits of a finite planet' (Jackson, 2017: 22).
- Prosperity can include societal wealth, some ideas of growth (debatable) but should include broader economic issues related to social and environmental wellbeing and community values.
- **A purposeful economy**
 - Shared prosperity
 - People are flourishing, comfortable, healthy, happy
 - People are able to engage in purposeful work
 - Community and stakeholder oriented
 - Green
- Therefore, rather than fixate on growth, the public economic purpose of HE should be to **enhance prosperity and develop purposeful economies**.
 - This requires some element of **economic change** – HE contributing to the formation of the kind of economy that will benefit society and the world in normative terms



Reformed Economic Purposes and Arts and Humanities

- The economic purposes of HE should be:
 - To empower graduates to engage in purposeful and meaningful work (private)
 - To drive the development of purposeful economies
- Arts and Humanities are very well suited to these economic purposes!
- Narrative is key!



Narratives makes us human

- Narrative is 'a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process, and change' (Herman, 2007).
- People require narratives to cope with the constant flux of daily life, to make sense of what is occurring around them and to work out how to navigate life.
- The stories we tell share knowledge and ideas, situate us, and provide us with purpose (Barthes)
- This is the fundamental activity that distinguishes humans from other species. (Mayer, 2021)
- Narrative Economics (Shiller, 2019) – narrative and storytelling have underpinned all major economic events
- Narrative in Business (Robson et al, 2021) – narrative fundamentally underpins all economic activity



Types of narrative

- **Belonging and obligation**

- Narratives are the foundation of belonging to a community
- Narratives provide norms to a group
- Narratives are the foundation of common knowledge
- Narratives provide the mechanisms for relationships of obligation within the group

- **Understanding and navigation**

- Narratives describe how the world works and our place within it
- Narratives provide tools to make sense of and navigate the world

- **Causality**

- Narrative provide stories that link actions to outcomes
- Narratives provide the logical mechanism for understanding how actions can become purposive

- **Normativity**

- Narratives are the foundation for understanding how the world should be and our place in making that happen

- In combination different types of narrative provide a form of belief system that can fundamentally change behaviour in a way that turns anarchy to community, that transforms our lives from 'nasty, brutish and short' into 'flourishing' (Collier, 2019)

Narrative Skills (Robson et al. 2020 & 2021)

- Study of Humanities Graduates and Study of Narrative in Business
- Concepts of narrative and storytelling permeate A&H
- A&H graduates are particularly linked with a distinctive set of skills: 'narrative skills framework'
 - Narrative Communication (persuasion, mastery of language, storycrafting)
 - Empathy and Perspective Taking
 - Critical Analysis, Synthesis, and Managing Complex Information
 - Creativity, imagination, and multiplicity
 - Ability to work across modes of communication (including digital)
- All contribute to developing, analysing, and communicating narratives
- Holistic framework
- Formed through engagement in humanistic knowledge and values



Narrative Skills and Economic Purposes of HE

- Valued in business (particularly in leaders) for: selling, communicating, establishing strategy, establishing identity of company, establishing purpose and driving feelings of belonging, managing change and uncertainty
- Potentially critical to manifesting broader economic purposes of HE at both individual and public levels
- Deployment of narrative skills cut across types of narrative:
 - **Belonging and Obligation:** linked with self-formation and purposeful career narratives
 - **Understanding and Navigation:** offering resilience and flexibility in a changing labour market
 - **Causality and Normativity:** enabling graduates to become agents of economic change, crafting new social and economic narratives and driving the development of more purposeful economies.



Belonging: Self-formation and Purposeful Career Narratives

- Narrative skills, when turned inwards, can become a kind of reflexive voice (see Archer)
- The stories we tell about ourselves... to ourselves... make ourselves
- Narrative construction makes sense of new possibilities through flexible thinking and experimentation to negotiate the gap between present and possible selves (Markus and Nurius, 1986), crafting a narrative around the journey to an ideal (see Ibarra and Petriglieri's (2010) on identity play)
- Self formation is inherently a story-laden process of self-making
- As such, narrative skills are a mechanism of agency in the process of individual formation
- BUT ALSO the mechanism by which self-forming individuals relate to wider social structures and understand their place in society – belonging and obligations within communities
- **Implications for employability and career narratives**
 - Psychological discussion of employability and careers has increasingly emphasized the catalytic impact of storytelling to guide career construction and advancement (Savickas, 2012)
 - Key mechanism of agency in relation to employment
 - Self-forming narratives establish agentic career trajectories increasing likelihood of purposeful work and linking employment with belonging and a wider sense of value and self-worth



Navigating Uncertainty: Resilience and Flexibility

- Technological advancement, organizational downsizing and a flexible, globalized market have increased job mobility and brought attention to the art of self-managing careers (Brown & Hesketh, 2004)
- Radical labour market change on the horizon – tech, AI, Net zero
- Narrative is critical to understanding the present and the future and navigating uncertainty
- **Narrative skills are both desired by range of employers for their flexibility and provide individuals with the tools to navigate uncertainty by crafting future optional narratives for themselves**
- Narrative skills may underpin the archetype of contemporary resilient workers:
 - Protean worker (Hall, 1976) – shapeshifting to accommodate changes in economic and work circumstance
 - Boundaryless worker (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) - moving between companies for personal and professional benefit





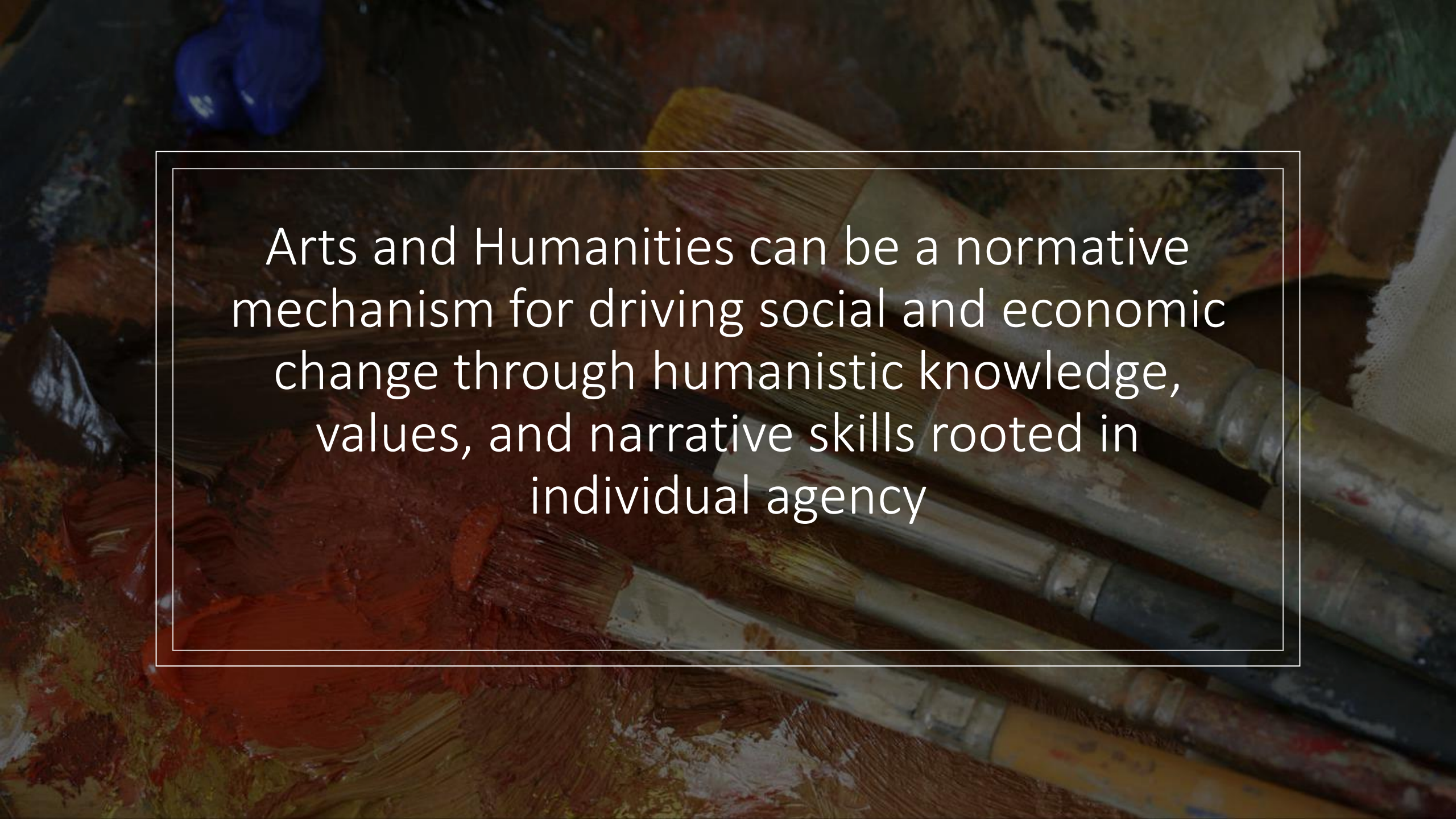
Causality and Normativity: Crafting New Narratives

- Shifting fixation with growth to broader understandings of prosperity and a purposeful economy requires imagining new economic narrative.
- Economic transformation is manifested at the macro, meso, and micro levels
- Involves working with multiplicity and alternative futures and imagining narrative pathways to achieve ideal futures
- New economic narratives are essential
- Narrative skills are required to link causality with new normative economic futures.



Rethinking skills supply and demand

- Current debate rooted in linear assumptions of skills supply and demand
- BUT HE should have a normative economic role – providing graduates with the **knowledge, values, and skills** required to transform society and the economy for a greater good.
- This is becoming urgent in the face of economic and climate uncertainties which most people agree require radical economic transformation.
- HE should be empowering graduates to reimagine and fashion new social and economic futures for themselves and become agents of economic change



Arts and Humanities can be a normative mechanism for driving social and economic change through humanistic knowledge, values, and narrative skills rooted in individual agency

Conclusion

- We MUST talk about the economic purposes of HE
- But the current framing of these inevitably positions A&H in a vulnerable place and liable to criticism
- Current framing in reductive orthodox economic assumptions about the purpose of work, the nature of humanity, and constant economic growth
- Reframing is necessary: purposeful work; a purposeful economy
- When looked at economic purposes this way, A&H degrees are critical
- Narrative and narrative skills provide a set of conceptual tools for thinking about how individuals craft successful relationships with work, the labour market and the economy
- Particularly key in thinking about the normative role of HE in driving economic change
- Provides a new way of articulating the economic importance of A&H that frames value and purpose in individual and public terms