



What Makes You Human?

by Christopher Oscarson, Dean

No consensus has yet emerged about what the age of artificial intelligence (AI) might mean for us individually or collectively; the only certainty seems to be that we face epochal change. AI's disruptive impact is already felt in the changing texture of everyday life, and for our students, AI impacts everything from homework and classroom pedagogy to post-graduation employment. Every department and discipline at the university must rapidly assess the implications AI has for both what and how we teach. Certain programs may disappear altogether. When AI can almost instantaneously summarize thousands of texts, identify images, and generate essays in a matter of seconds, will the humanities survive the age of AI?

Without question. The humanities are needed now more than ever.

There are at least two broad reasons why the humanities will continue to be core to who we are and what we do as humans. The first is practical. The skills developed by engaging with literature, philosophy, languages, and art uniquely qualify individuals for a job market marked by disruption and change. A recent Oxford University study documented how the resiliency, intellectual flexibility, and proficiencies learned while studying the humanities make students particularly adroit at adapting to disruptions caused by unsettled financial markets, global pandemics, and the rise of automation and AI technologies.¹

Similarly, journalist and educator Nils Gilman predicted that those who have cultivated skills uniquely taught by the humanities will become important players in their fields. "The most prized future workers will be those who can decode a sea of outputs, spot the meaningful signal, and translate it into action that others understand and trust. . . . They will be capable of designing decision processes rather than merely executing them."² The skills fostered by a deep exposure to the humanities enable students to navigate

complexity, inhabit different cultural or social vantage points, communicate clearly, and make discerning judgements.

The second reason why the humanities will be relevant long into the future goes beyond these transferable skills and gets at the heart of what it means to be human. While the various applications of AI will change how we research, write, and interact with the world—much as the invention of writing, the printing press, the computer, and the internet did in previous generations—AI will never be able to replicate the engagement of literature, art, or performance nor the experience that comes with the inspiration and insight of entering into a meaningful relationship with beauty and truth. AI can circumscribe the experience through summary, cataloging, and description, but it cannot replicate the experience for us.

The fear that AI will ultimately displace learning languages, reading novels, or studying art fundamentally misunderstands what is core to the human experience. For example, the point of reading is not simply to consume content. It is rather to enter into an active relationship with the language, ideas, characters, setting, rhetoric, and narrative of the text. Similarly, a student who uses AI to write an essay has misunderstood that the point of writing is not to have a finished paper. The point is the experience and process of writing that demands agency, stretches understanding, and requires a focused engagement to make connections and think through an argument. These experiences and the work they require have an emergent quality, producing a perspective and experience that did not exist before in the text, the reader, or the writer. The process in which the reader or writer engages, interacts, and ultimately changes is exactly the point. The labor of learning is not just getting to the last page or word; it is all about the growth that comes in the process of making connections and receiving inspiration. This is what AI can describe but not replicate.

Elder David A. Bednar has warned us that while the benefits of AI are real, the ease of the technology as a replacement for our own investment of thought and effort is a threat to our moral agency. According to Lehi, the expulsion from the Garden of Eden—characterized by St. Ambrose of Milan (AD 337–97) as *felix culpa* (the fortunate fall)³—made possible the *experience* of opposition and growth fundamental to our mortal and eternal development. The work of experience and the exercise of agency was the point of creation, not an unlucky byproduct. AI can facilitate how we learn and what we do, but it should not replace the transformational labor of learning itself. The real danger that AI presents us and our students is that it substitutes data and information for wisdom and understanding. If we don't learn to think on our own, develop discernment, foster good judgement, and cultivate wisdom by understanding the uses and limits of technology like AI, we risk being "transformed from agents who can act into objects that are only acted upon."⁴

The humanities steep us in the deep experience and ideas of culture that, when taught in the light of the gospel, will develop the wisdom, perspective, and skills to take charge of our moral agency. Walking together with the great artists and thinkers of history enables us to navigate ambiguity and change to exercise judgement, discern truth, and receive inspiration.

In the age of AI, the question of what it means to be human—the central question of the humanities—will not diminish or dwindle. It only promises to become more obvious. ■

1. James Robson et al., "The Value of the Humanities: Understanding the Career Destinations of Oxford Humanities Graduates" (Oxford University, 2023).

2. Nils Gilman, "How to Future-Proof Your Career in the Age of AI," *Noëma*, April 9, 2026.

3. "O felix culpa!" is a phrase in the *Exsultet* (Easter Proclamation) that makes up the Easter celebration of many Christian traditions.

4. David A. Bednar, "Things as They Really Are 2.0," *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, November 3, 2024.