Press Release: 27 October 2015
A.C. Grayling speaks at the Cambridge Union
“Great conversation of the humanities”

On Tuesday the 27th of October 2015, at the Cambridge Union Society, philosopher A.C. Grayling delivered a speech entitled ‘Culture and Anarchy Revisited’. A question and answer session followed the speech, when Professor Grayling answered questions from the audience of over a hundred members, on subjects from meliorism to the value of a humanities degree in the working world. Sachin Parathalingam, Speakers Officer for Michaelmas 2015, led the event as the host and facilitated questions from the audience.

A.C. Grayling is a British philosopher associated in Britain with the new atheism movement. As well as founding and serving as Master of the New College of the Humanities, A.C Grayling serves as Vice President of the British Humanist Association and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts.

Professor Grayling began with an account of the life of Matthew Arnold, author of the original ‘Culture and Anarchy’ essays published in 1869. He highlighted key influences on Arnold's work, including a proximity to certain ideals behind education and the charged atmosphere of revolution, following the 1866 Reform Demonstration at Hyde Park. After explaining Arnold’s belief that education could be a saving force, Grayling went on to discuss later figures such as Bertrand Russell, Karl Popper and Ludwig Wittgenstein. He outlined how they also engaged with the idea of education saving the mind by enabling individuals to be informed and reflective.

The talk then began to consider the many interpretations of culture, with Grayling noting the different perceptions of what a cultural education entailed. He discussed John Bright’s remarks about culture as a smattering of Latin and Greek, as well as Arnold’s proposal that a cultural education lies in the attempt to reach perfection by exposing ourselves to the best that is thought and known.

On ideologies, whether in religious or political guises, Grayling argued that they fundamentally want people to think in a like manner to the same issues. As a counterbalance to this, he how many great thinkers and theorists of the classical period acknowledged the richness that comes with diversity.

Referencing Plutarch’s ‘Septum Sapientium Convivium’ (Dinner of the Seven Wise Men), he underlined the importance of tolerance, appreciation and being informed by listening carefully. Grayling raised that many problems stem from not hearing what people say but thinking that we do and further explored the notion of a freedom that occurs by not being constrained in the “prison house of a certain outlook”. Linking back to Arnold’s ‘Culture and Anarchy’, he concluded that by studying the best that is thought and known, one can think freely and freshly and this is provided by studying the humanities.

At the heart of his talk, Grayling emphasised the value of engagement with the “great conversation of the humanities”. In an environment where there is an increasing decline in direct funding for the arts; universities are closing certain humanities departments and reading is characterised as a leisure activity, he adamantly defended the pursuit of humanities degrees. Moreover, he highlighted how his college (the New College of the Humanities) aimed to support solely the humanities to the same level that other institutions support solely the sciences.
A wide range of questions from the audience, covered topics from the curriculum for religious studies, the disadvantages of specialism in academic studies and the role of the sciences in the dialogue with the humanities.

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For footage of the event go to https://www.youtube.com/user/cambridgeunionsoc