

I teach the humanities, and I still don't know what their value is

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We humanists have been issuing a steady stream of defenses of the humanities for many decades now, but the crisis of the humanities only grows. In the face of declining student interest and mounting political scrutiny, universities and colleges are increasingly putting humanities departments on the chopping block.

5 This suggests that we humanists do not know the value of the thing we are trying to defend. I do not know whether the study of the humanities promotes democracy or improves your moral character or enriches your leisure time or improves your critical thinking skills or increases your empathy.

10 You might be surprised to learn that this bit of ignorance poses no obstacle to me in the classroom. I suppose it would if I approached the teaching of Descartes as a matter of explaining why reading Descartes will make you a better person. I am there to lay out the premises of his reasoning, to explain some of the relevant concepts, to entertain questions and objections and to work through the arguments together with the students to see if they hold water. We are searching, trying to find the value that may be there.

The humanistic spirit is, fundamentally, an inquisitive one.

15 In contrast, defenses of the humanities are not — and cannot be — conducted in an inquisitive spirit, because a defensive spirit is inimical to an inquisitive one. We should be alert to the danger of becoming accustomed to putting our worst foot forward. An atmosphere of urgency and calls for immediate action are hostile to fields of study like literature and philosophy that require a contemplative mood, and the pretense of knowing what one doesn't actually know is hostile to forms of inquiry that demand an open
20 mind.

A defensive mind-set also encourages politicization. If the study of literature or philosophy helps to fight sexism and racism or to promote democracy and free speech — and everyone agrees that sexism and racism are bad and democracy and free speech are good — then you have your answer as to why we shouldn't cut funding for the study of literature or philosophy. Politicization is a way of arming the
25 humanities for its political battles, but it comes at an intellectual cost. Why are sexism and racism so bad? Why is democracy so good? Politicization silences these and other questions, whereas the function of the humanities is to raise them.

Defensiveness also threatens to infect our work as humanists. A posture that we initially assumed for the purposes of confronting skeptics comes to restructure how we talk to our students, how we construct
30 our syllabuses and even how we read the texts we assign, which now must prove themselves useful toward whichever political goals currently receive the stamp of approval.

Humanists are not alone in their ignorance about the purpose of their disciplines. Mathematicians or economists or biologists might mutter something about practical applications of their work, but very few serious scholars confine their research to some narrow pragmatic agenda. The difference between the
35 humanists and the scientists is simply that scientists are under a lot less pressure to explain why they exist, because the society at large believes itself to already have the answer to that question. If physics were constantly out to justify itself, it would become politicized, too, and physicists would also start spouting pious platitudes about how physics enriches your life.

40 I may not know why it is important to read Homer and Plato, but I do have a deep love for reading, teaching and pondering those texts. That love is what I have to share with others.

Are the humanities valuable? What is their value? These are good questions, they are worth asking, and if humanists don't ask them, no one will. But remember: No one can genuinely ask a question to which she thinks she already has the answer.