

Proposition de corrigé tribune Uselessness

Rethinking the Value of Uselessness / in defense of purposeful science

In a recent column on record.com, Marcel O’Gorman championed the concept of “uselessness,” arguing for its intrinsic value in our society. While O’Gorman makes some insightful points about the gratuitousness of art and what it could bring to modern research, his glorification of uselessness overlooks the nuanced role it plays in the modern world. He also tends to pit hard science and art in a way that could fail to understand the similarities between both. I would like to offer a counter perspective that challenges this romanticized notion of uselessness and examines its limitations.

O’Gorman posits that uselessness can foster creativity and imagination, providing a sanctuary from the pressures of productivity. While it’s true that moments of idleness can spark innovation, excessively championing uselessness risks undermining the importance of productivity and purposeful action. In a society grappling with pressing challenges like climate change and social inequality, we cannot afford to retreat into a state of perpetual disengagement. From a more mundane perspective, in an age of budget deficits and austerity, states also expect researchers to be achievement-driven.

Furthermore, O’Gorman suggests that embracing uselessness can be a form of resistance against a hyper-capitalist culture that commodifies every aspect of human existence. While this critique holds some merit, it’s overly simplistic to equate all forms of productivity with capitalist exploitation. Many endeavors, such as scientific research, artistic creation, and community service, contribute to the betterment of society without succumbing to the relentless pursuit of profit. The development of vaccines or diagnostic technologies are not always highly profitable and contribute to the betterment of mankind.

Moreover, O’Gorman’s celebration of uselessness risks reinforcing privilege and elitism. For those struggling to make ends meet, the luxury of indulging in purposeless pursuits may be out of reach. Only wealthy individuals may decide to spend most of their time focusing on solving impossible equations. By valorizing aimlessness, we risk overlooking the structural inequalities that prevent marginalized communities from fully participating in society’s opportunities and resources. Science students should be encouraged to foster their creativity and innovation in a way that could result in significant life-changing discoveries. The idea of the absent-minded researcher safely ensconced in his ivory tower does science a disservice. Michel Talagrand, the French mathematician who received the Abel prize last week for solving the Gaussian Free Field problem defined his seven-year quest as « quixotic ». This is obviously laudable but should not and could not be the norm.

Instead of embracing a wholesale rejection of usefulness, we should strive for a more balanced approach that recognizes the inherent value of both productivity and leisure. Rather than viewing these concepts as diametrically opposed, we should explore how they can complement each other to enrich our lives and communities. In that respect, the opposition between art science, humanities and STEM appears hollow at the core. Many world-class scientists were also well-read and educated. Take Bertrand Russell who was a mathematician and a philosopher. Both domains nurtured his intellectual activity and mathematicians often compare their field to music as they both engage in abstract thinking, analyzing patterns, recurrences and rhythmic variations.

In conclusion, while Marcel O’Gorman’s column extols the virtues of uselessness, it’s essential to critically examine his arguments and consider the broader implications. By embracing a more nuanced understanding of productivity and leisure, we can foster a society that values both purposeful action and moments of restorative idleness. As we navigate an increasingly complex world, let us not retreat into the comfort of uselessness or vacuously oppose science and humanities but instead engage thoughtfully with the challenges and opportunities that confront us.

A very good student's paper (slightly edited)

Can we afford uselessness?

The concept of 'useless » and « useful » are easily thrown around in the public discourse, the first to criticize and the latter to validate a thing. Because a useful thing seems inherently good, a useless one is probably a waste of resources. O' Gorman, an English professor, tries to flip this idea on its head in his recent column on Therecord.com.

What O'Gorman criticizes is what he sees as an obsession, in businesses and especially in tech research for profit without consideration for ethics or other things that the STEM fields seem to find quite boring. He has got a point. I agree that innovation should not be all about 'profit and efficiency'. But what's the alternative?

That is where our columnist develops a very simplistic rationale: technology and science are about pragmatism and philosophy is just an afterthought in those fields. Why? Because big tech companies like Facebook equal bad. I dislike multinational malpractices as much as the next guy but we tend to forget where they started. Facebook at its beginning / inception was a means to reinforce social relations in closed circles, the very same relations it is now degrading. The truth is more often than not much more complicated than the equation of science and innovation with evil intent. Recently, the movie Oppenheimer offered us a glimpse of this complexity.

It is easy just like Flexner to be nostalgic / wistful of times when scientists were also well-known philosophers like Descartes or Locke and I am not saying that ethics is unimportant.

But we often miss a couple of details, all the scientists had the luxury of writing a couple of essays between publications because they were well-off. Nowadays it is not scientists who are at the head of companies; The STEM machine is not spearheaded by researchers but by businessmen. No Tech billionaire has ever won a Nobel Prize because they are not doing the science. The point I am making is that the seniority of researchers depend on their getting articles peer-reviewed and published in prestigious scientific journals. O'Gorman should not be preaching to scientists and researchers but to politicians, businessmen and the money makers who turn science into a profitable, potentially soulless, system.

Taking this into consideration, it seems we can't afford uselessness as a society. If researchers are not paid enough, they will be driven to money-making fields (especially if they are saddled with a crushing student debt and trying to enter the property market). What pays off most is often shallow commercial tech innovation.

Uselessness has a cost and O' Gorman fails to consider it when he expands on the nature of scientific progress. The STEM machine needs money and investment and it should not get into the wrong hands.