

“Why the Humanities?”

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Good morning. I'm very happy to be with you to join in a discussion about our important subject. I think we all recognize that the question—“Why the Humanities”—can only be answered in an approximate way, because the humanities inevitably shade into some of the social sciences (on the one hand) and the creative and performing arts (on the other). But let's put our academic categories to one side for the moment, and simply accept the terms as they are given to us: that the humanities consist of the study of classical and modern languages and literature; of significant texts and issues in philosophy, history and religious studies, as well as works of art, archaeology and music. In other words, these are subjects that are centered on human life, thought, and culture in a direct way. In fact, for a very long time, this sphere of learning was called “Humanity”—in the singular, not plural—and that is where the emphasis really ought to fall.

What is distinctive about these subjects, and why should they be supported?

First of all, there are—as we know—practical or pragmatic reasons for support. Democracies cannot function, at least not very well, without an educated citizenry. And in today's world, we must also work effectively in a global as well as a national environment. So we need—in public service, in business, in the military and elsewhere—people who know foreign languages and cultures. We need inquiring minds that are interested in learning about the world's diversity of peoples, about their different religions and philosophical world-views, and certainly about their histories and forms of government.

We have been told that if the United States wants to do well in the future, we must be leaders in science, engineering, technology and innovation. This is certainly true, but it is only part of the equation, because the humanities are also urgently needed. It is hard to imagine that the nations of the world will be able to manage their affairs in anything close to a civilized way unless they have some reasonable degree of mutual understanding to help avoid constant serious friction as well as the deadliest forms of conflict. We need to know how to *use* the products of science and technology humanely—and that is unfortunately much harder than it is to *create* those products.

So yes, we can make a case for the practical or instrumental uses of the humanities, especially in the complicated global universe that we now inhabit. We can even argue a slightly different but important point: that the humanities help to foster freedom of thought and action, and that they are essential to the creation and maintenance of a democratic way of life.

Unless we are able to study—and look with a critical eye upon—historical events and their interpretation, or the bases of religious beliefs, or the philosophical foundations that underlie different conceptions of government—and a multitude of other subjects—then we can scarcely

be said to be free. And it is a good wager that a democratic form of government will be far more likely to allow and foster such freedom, than any other kind of government. And vice-versa: this kind of freedom is more likely to strengthen and sustain a vibrant democracy—not weaken it. In short, there is a close relationship between the humanities and our entire conception of good governance. And that is another practical reason for us to value and support these subjects.

I think that the pragmatic arguments add up to a very strong case. But if I were to step back for a moment, I would want to add that the humanities have no monopoly in helping to fulfill these important goals. In fact, if we think back to the last congressional election—driven by so much anger and outrage—we might well say that if the voters knew somewhat more about economics, they would have understood that so many of the ousted incumbent congress men and women were not responsible for the national deficit, or the amount of joblessness, or home foreclosures, or even the stimulus package; or that if big government was somehow mysteriously the villain, the trajectory toward larger and larger expenditures and deficits was much greater under President Bush than President Obama. Moreover, if people had understood and thought more about a truly functional democracy, they would also have realized that one political party's determination to vote "no" on essentially all legislative proposals put before it, was not an optimal way to serve the best interests of the people and the nation.

In other words, if we wanted to make a pragmatic case for strengthening our ability to sustain a workable democracy in a globalized world, we could argue strongly that knowledge about some of the social sciences as well as the humanities is desperately needed, and we should be reading—for example—texts about politics and economics such as de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, or *The Federalist Papers*, or the work of John Maynard Keynes and Milton Friedman—or Adam Smith, or John Stuart Mills' *On Liberty*, or Marx, Weber, Schumpeter, Galbraith, Daniel Bell and any number of other theorists and commentators in politics, economics, sociology and related fields.

When dictators take over a country, they are just as likely to shut down free inquiry in the fields that I have just mentioned, as they are in philosophy, history, religious studies and the arts. So, yes, the humanities have very important societal uses, but I doubt they are more pertinent than some of the social sciences in this respect. At the very least, they do not have a monopoly in this sphere.

So let me come back to my first question: is there something genuinely distinctive about the humanities?

I have absolutely no doubt that that there is. I want to suggest that these subjects relate more directly to human experience, to human life and its meaning, than any other set of academic disciplines. I can say personally that this was the most important reason that led me to study literature, history, philosophy and art.

There is a line in Samuel Becket's *Waiting for Godot*, when the main character turns to Didi, his companion, and says: "We always do find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression that we exist." The line can be read in several ways, but one implication—for me at least—is that we are

only genuinely alive when something happens to revivify our sense of self. We have the impression that we exist when we encounter and are conscious of—fully alert to—experiences so powerful that we are compelled to ask what they mean, and why they stimulate us to search for their meaning. We also “exist” when we have lived enough—and studied and learned enough—to give us an increased awareness of who we are; what our shaping ideas and values are; what we believe a purposeful life might consist of; and even—because we can never quite know—what we are waiting for.

In short, the humanities are those subjects in which we are most likely to confront ideas about existence and meaning more immediately—and more comprehensively—than in other subjects, and they do this because of the very nature of philosophy, religion, history, literature and the arts.

If we explore these fields of learning deeply, then they insist—not just invite, but insist—that we consider different ways of living a life; different selves that we might—or might not—become. They cause us to reflect on the lives of people in the past; or on fictional lives that are powerfully dramatized in literature or art; or lives in the narratives of religious texts, from the Old and New Testaments to Mohammed and the Koran, or the Buddha.

Part of the reason why the humanities possess this power to educate is that they tend to bring us closer to the texture and actual flux of human experience than either the sciences or social sciences—not always, by any means, because they can sometimes be analytical, abstract and theoretical—but they are often more palpable, tangible, dramatic and imaginative in their ability to capture—vividly—characters, events and ideas in forceful and provocative ways. When we are reading *Anna Karenina*, or wrestling with Thucydides or Gibbon, or witnessing the drama of Plato’s Dialogues, or watching *King Lear*, or reading Keats, or looking at Titian’s *Pietà*, we know that we are about as close to the vital signs of existence as any representation of life will ever take us.

Gaining knowledge in this particular way means looking less for closure or generalizations about human beings and their behavior, but more for insights and illuminations gained either through what we are studying, or, analogously, what we are experiencing in our actual lives with all their vicissitudes. In his great essay, *The Art of Fiction*, Henry James captured in a few words how we can learn from experience: whether the source of the experience is in literature and related subjects, or in the complexity of life itself:

‘Experience is never limited’—James wrote—“and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every airborne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative...it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of life into revelations.”

James wanted us to develop a heightened consciousness, always on the alert, with its own store of impressions and perceptions that we have already filtered, named, and configured—like that huge spider-web suspended in our consciousness: so that all our future encounters with even the smallest particles of new experience can be captured, registered and interpreted in such a way

that they can yield new “revelations” of significant meaning. In other words, James wanted—as he once said—for each of us to be “someone upon whom nothing is lost.” In this way—through this process—if we are fortunate enough, and responsive enough, we may gradually learn to see more clearly the possible meaning of situations and events; to be better attuned to the nuances, inflections and character of other human beings; to perceive and to weigh values with more precision; to judge on the basis of increasingly fine distinctions; and perhaps to be more effective, wise and generous in our actions.

Of course, not all of the humanities work in this way. Not everything is dramatized imaginatively, or encountered and registered through the medium of direct experience. We know that in philosophy and in theology, for example, the approach to fundamental problems is usually propositional—through argument and attempted proof—through the creation of systems that deal with everything from epistemology to ontology, to ethics and moral imperatives, to distributive justice, to faith and belief and their implications for action.

Here, the methodology is obviously very different from the process that James was describing, but the quest is the same: what kind of “beings” or creatures are we; what do we know, and how do we know it; what values are to be cherished and why; what is our conception of a valuable or significant life?

Most important, while philosophy and theology may be theoretical and systematic, they too have to return constantly, not only to other texts, but to human experience itself—to the reality of life as it is lived—in order for them to stay close to their “material,” so to speak. Because unless their systems are grounded in observation, insight and the interpretation of actuality—of human existence with all its divagations—there is simply nothing to build upon.

Moreover, because philosophical, theological and other systems are themselves inevitably vulnerable and imperfect, we may often end up—in those fields—close to the place where Henry James left us: that is, we will come away from Aristotle or Kant or Aquinas or Wittgenstein, not with systematic answers that will satisfy all our many questions and doubts, but with illuminations and clarifications that help us to understand life at a much deeper level than before. Conclusive proofs or impregnable theories are not what we will find; insights and understanding are what we can hope for. Systems fail—William James once said—but instincts survive.

Let me begin to close with a final thought that is a potential problem for many fields of learning, but particularly the humanities. It is no surprise to any of us that humanistic studies take and need time—an inordinate amount of time if they are approached in the right way. And the need for this amount of time is now beginning to test the limits of what many of our students are willing or able to give—especially because the humanities offer them no obvious useful or usable “results” that can be turned to short-term personal or societal advantage.

Shall we—or our students—spend tomorrow afternoon—and perhaps many evenings—reading Jane Austen’s *Emma* or George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* or any number of other significant books? Perhaps. But as a regular part of our lives—or our students’ lives—the odds of doing so are probably not very great. These and other humanistic works all require the most careful reading

in slow motion—as well as precise thinking and perhaps writing in even slower motion. Meanwhile, we live in an era when the pace of life is faster and when time appears to be in shorter and shorter supply. There are many reasons for this, but we know that—because of technology—the relationship between transmitting or gaining information, on the one hand, and searching for understanding and knowledge on the other—that relationship appears to be changing very rapidly. It is far too early to know what all the new technological instruments—whether hand-held or not—will do to the habits of students (and indeed everyone) over the long run. But it is already clear that many, many hours are taken up by the variety of functions that even the smallest new devices can make available to one.

Some of these interactions are positive, and can help education and learning considerably. But there is, at some point, an inevitable trade-off, where the solitude, concentration and time necessary to read *Moby Dick* or Yeat’s poetry—or to write about such works—is in such short supply that fewer and fewer students may undertake these challenging ventures. We can’t yet fathom the extent to which the concept of information is significantly at odds with the concepts of deep understanding and knowledge, but we know enough to realize that this profound problem is now confronting us, and we have barely begun to imagine how to deal with it.

When the great cultural anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, delivered a major lecture in 1994, he talked about his years at a small liberal arts college. The college had a Quaker tradition, but had been infiltrated over time by many students whose attitude—as Geertz put it—was “all irony, impatience and auto-critique.” The combination of Quakerism and impatience resulted in what Geertz called a “sort of noisy introspection.” But this left him undaunted. In fact, it stimulated him to take “just about every course that in any way looked as if it might interest me, come in handy, or do my character some good.” . . . He might, as he said, be lost or helpless, or racked with ontological anxiety; but he could try, at least, “not to be obtuse—which is (he added) my definition of a liberal education.”

Well, that was another era, and there is no point pretending that most of our students will want to ricochet so cheerfully and freely through their undergraduate years, with hardly a thought about their careers. The era and ambience which they have inherited press very hard against such an unfettered search for knowledge. Since the early 1980s, our nation has been undergoing a profound transformation of values, in which the pursuit and acquisition of wealth at an unprecedented scale has strained and in many places begun to break the fabric of our society. There has been a coarsening of the country’s sensibility, and this has inevitably affected young people, including how they think about their futures. When the gap between the very rich and all others in the nation becomes so vast; when social services are sometimes stripped away with very little thought about the real consequences; when the implied social contract that binds us all together is steadily weakened, then it is no wonder that our students should be deeply concerned about their careers.

Our job however, is to help as many of them as possible to explore whatever might “do [their] character some good,” or keep them from being “obtuse,” or help them find things that persuade them they “exist,” or encourage them to become persons upon whom “nothing is lost.” All of us have to participate in this effort, but you are the leaders directly involved in the institutions

where this can actually take place. With your residential communities, your general education courses, your excellent teaching, and your concern about the growth and development of individual students—you are, together, the colleges that can best offer undergraduates the chance, through the humanities, to learn more about themselves and others, and to think more deeply about their values. This task is more than simply difficult—particularly now, when the nation and the world are in such a harrowing state of affairs. But it is an essential task—and your commitment to the humanities and the liberal arts has rarely if ever been needed more than now.