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GUEST ESSAY

## I Teach the Humanities, and I Still Don't Know What Their Value Is

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**By Agnes Callard**, associate professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago and the author of “Aspiration: The Agency of Becoming.”

If a group of math students fails to learn the material, that might be because the teacher is not trying hard enough or because she has been inappropriately tasked with, for example, teaching calculus to toddlers. Supposing, however, that neither of these things is true — the teacher is passionately invested in teaching, and she has many suitable students — yet her students all fail the final exam, eventually we would be forced to say that she might not know math so well.

I believe that we humanists are in the position of this math teacher. We 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.

We humanists keep on trying to teach people what the value of the humanities is, and people keep failing to learn our lessons. This suggests to me that humanists do not know the value of the thing they are trying to defend. We can spout pieties that sound inspiring to those already convinced of our cause, but so too can an ignorant math teacher “teach” math to those who already know it.

As a humanist — someone who reads, teaches and researches primarily philosophy but also, on the side, novels and poems and plays and movies — I am prepared to come out and admit that I do not know what the value of the humanities is. 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.

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, but that is not how I teach Descartes, nor does any philosopher I know teach Descartes in that way. 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.

I once asked the best teacher I ever had why she no longer taught her favorite novel, and she said that she stopped teaching a book when she found she was no longer curious about it. The humanistic spirit is, fundamentally, an inquisitive one.

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. Defensiveness is, it must be admitted, an understandable response when budgets are being cut and the chopping block is brought out and you need to explain why you shouldn't be on it. It may be that humanists need to spend some of our time joining political battles, which, like all political battles, require their participants to pretend to know things that they do not actually know.

Nonetheless, 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 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 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 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 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.

I will admit that every time I hear of a classics department being cut, it hurts. 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, as well as the surprise and delight of finding that people thousands of years dead can be one's partners in inquiry.

If at some point I am called on to defend the study of Homer or Descartes at some official hearing, I will do my best, but I do not deem it right to change my approach to what I study and teach in anticipation of that encounter. I will not run to battle; the battle will have to come to me.

The task of humanists is to invite, to welcome, to entice, to excite, to engage. And when we let ourselves be ourselves, when we allow the humanistic spirit that animates us to flow out not only into our classrooms but also in our public-self presentation, we find we don't need to defend or prove anything: We are irresistible.

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.

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