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(sem assunto)

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I'll speak to Ruth tonight about what talk she might offer for that session. I've just noticed that the Fish link for my first seminar does not work - so article below

[The Opinion Pages](#)



Opinionator

A GATHERING OF OPINION FROM AROUND THE WEB

The Uses of the Humanities, Part Two

BY STANLEY FISH JANUARY 13, 2008 9:30 PM January 13, 2008 9:30 pm

In a poem titled “Matins,” the 17th century Anglican poet George Herbert says to God, *If you will “teach me thy love to know . . . Then by a sunbeam I will climb to thee.”* But the dynamics of the proffered bargain – if you do X, I’ll do Y – are undercut by the line that proposes it, and especially by the double pun in “sunbeam.”

“Sun” is a standard pun on Son; it refers to Jesus Christ; “beam” means not only ray of light, but a piece of wood large enough to support a structure; it refers to the cross on which a crucified Christ by dying takes upon himself and redeems (pays the price for) the sins of those who believe in him. So while “by a sunbeam” seems to specify the means by which the poem’s speaker will perform a certain act – “I will climb to thee” – the phrase undercut his claim to be able to do so by reminding us (not him) that Christ has already done the climbing and thereby prevented (in the sense of anticipating) any positive act man mistakenly thinks to be his own. If the speaker climbs to God, he does so by means of God, and cannot take any personal credit for what he “does.” If he truly

knows God's love, he will know that as an unconditional and all-sufficing gift it has disabled him as an agent.

This brief analysis of a line of poetry that simultaneously reports a resolution and undermines it is an example of the kind of work and teaching I have done for almost five decades. It is the work of a humanist, that is, someone employed in a college to teach literary, philosophical and historical texts. The questions raised in [my previous column](#) and in the responses to it are: what is the value of such work, why should anyone fund it, and why (for what reasons) does anyone do it?

Why do I do it? I don't do it because Herbert and I are co-religionists. I don't believe what he believes or value what he values. I don't do it because it inspires me to do other things, like change my religion, or go out and work for the poor. If I had to say, I'd say that I do it because I get something like an athletic satisfaction from the experience of trying to figure out how a remarkable verbal feat has been achieved.

The satisfaction is partly self-satisfaction – it is like solving a puzzle – but the greater satisfaction is the opportunity to marvel at what a few people are able to do with the language we all use. “Isn't that amazing?,” I often say to my students. “Don't you wish you could write a line like that?” (In the column I used the word “pleasure” to describe the reward of discussing and unpacking literary texts, but “pleasure” is at once too narrow and too broad; it is the very particular pleasure that attends cognitive awareness of an effect you not only experience but can now explain.)

Note that what we're talking about here is the study, not the production, of humanistic texts. The question I posed in the column was not do works of literature, philosophy and history have instrumental value, but does the academic analysis of works of literature, philosophy and history have instrumental value. When [Jeffrey Sachs says](#) that “in the real world” the distinction between the humanities and the sciences on the basis of utility does not hold because “philosophers have made important contributions to the sciences” and “the hard sciences have had a profound impact on the humanities,” he doesn't come within 100 miles of refuting anything I say. Whatever does or does not happen in the “real world” is not the issue; the issue is what happens in the academic world, where the distinctions Sachs dismisses do hold. It may be, as [George Mobus maintains](#), that “only in academia where you are supposed to be a specialist . . . do we parse the world into silos,” but the academic world is by definition parsed into silos and when the

utility of one of them is questioned, it is not to any point to say that in some other world everything exists in some great big mix.

In general those who disagree with my assertions do what Sachs and Mobus do — slide (without acknowledgment or awareness) back and forth between the precincts of academia (which, to make the point again, are the precincts where the dispute is located) to the precincts, often larger, of some other enterprise. When I declare that the humanities are of no use whatsoever, I am talking about humanities departments (“the humanities” is an academic, not a cultural category), not about poets and philosophers and the effects they do or do not have in the world and on those who read them.

The funding of the humanities in colleges and universities cannot be justified by pointing to the fact that poems and philosophical arguments have changed lives and started movements. (I was surprised that no one mentioned “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” a book Lincoln is said to have credited with the starting of the Civil War.) The pertinent question is, *Do humanities courses change lives and start movements? Does one teach with that purpose, and if one did could it be realized?*

If the answers to these questions are (as I contend) “no” — one teaches the subject matter and any delayed effect of what happens in a classroom is contingent and cannot be aimed at — then the route of external justification of the humanities, of a justification that depends on the calculation of measurable results, is closed down. The fact that some commentators, including a few of my former students, report life-changing experiences as a result of their studies is heartening (although I am sure that the vast majority would report something quite different), but it hardly amounts to a reason for supporting the entire apparatus of departments, degrees, colloquia etc. that has grown up around the academic study of humanistic texts.

Some who posted put forward a negative reason for supporting the teaching the humanities. They say things like, [if only “the cabal running or government . . . had known a bit of history, we might not be in Iraq”](#) and [“Would the neoconservatives really believe that the world is a battlefield of good versus evil](#) were they to expand their minds to include a more complete knowledge of history and human nature?” But the neoconservatives these respondents no doubt have in mind — Wolfowitz, Pearle, Kristol, Huntington — are as widely read in history, philosophy and the arts as anyone, and they participate in deeply intellectual discussions of important texts in the Liberty Fund seminars and elsewhere.

Assuming that if they had been schooled in the right texts (Paul Krugman rather than Milton Friedman, Cornel West rather than William Buckley) they would have devised better policies is a fantasy, and indeed, it is the same fantasy the neoconservatives buy into when they argue that if we were to introduce radical Muslims to the writings of Jefferson, Madison and J.S. Mill, they would learn to love freedom and stop wanting to destroy us. The truth is that a mastery of literary and philosophical texts and the acquisition of wisdom (in whatever form) are independent variables.

All of this should not be taken to mean, as it was by some, that I am attacking the humanities or denigrating them or declaring them worthless. I am saying that the value of the humanities cannot be validated by some measure external to the obsessions that lead some (like me) to devote their working lives to them – measures like increased economic productivity, or the fashioning of an informed citizenry, or the sharpening of moral perceptions, or the lessening of prejudice and discrimination. If these or some other instrumental benchmarks – instrumental in the sense that they are tied to a secondary effect rather than to an internal economy – are what the humanities must meet, they will always fall short. But the refusal of the humanities to acknowledge or bow to an end they do not contemplate is, I argue, their salvation and their value.

As [Stacia says](#) in words more precise than mine, “The subject of these studies are not to be used as tools to achieve something else . . . they are the achievement.”

Of course, this does not mean that anyone will pay for them. In fact, as several posters observed, my argument (and it isn't only mine) that the humanities are their own good and aren't much good for anything else can be used to justify turning humanities departments into service departments and cutting funding for humanities research.

I still remember serving on an all-university committee at Johns Hopkins University and hearing one of my fellow committee members say that he would happily support the English department because his wife very much enjoyed seeing plays. When I told him that the department never put on plays, and at that moment did not even have a faculty member who was interested in plays, he was amazed and asked the obvious question: What then do you do? When I replied that we research things like medieval astrology, Renaissance iconography, 18th century political satire and romantic theories of the imagination, and then share our findings and interpretations with students, his puzzlement grew.

Had he asked the next question – but what can you do with that? – I would have had to say, not much of anything except, perhaps, entice a few people to join the same esoteric enterprise. He was more polite than another colleague, a friend, who announced one day that members of English departments were “parasites on the carcass of literature.” A medical doctor, he was also a lover of literature and just didn’t see why a world that already had poets and novelists and playwrights needed an army of people feeding off them.

His sentiments were echoed by those respondents who complained that humanities departments are narrowly professional and concerned largely with reproducing themselves. “A father” [reports](#) the “repugnant truth” that “the humanities is study of a discipline. Mastery of the discipline qualifies you to profess it.” [Qjiang observes](#) that “there are Shakespeares and Shakespeare’s interpreters” and “Humanities nowadays... largely and unfortunately refer to the latter.”

That’s right. What is in need of defense is not the existence of Shakespeare, but the existence of the Shakespeare industry (and of the Herbert industry and of the Hemingway industry), with its seminars, journals, symposia, dissertations, libraries. The challenge of utility is not put (except by avowed Philistines) to literary artists, but to the scholarly machinery that seems to take those operating it further and further away from the primary texts into the reaches of incomprehensible and often corrosive theory. More than one poster decried the impenetrable jargon of literary studies. Why, one wonders, is the same complaint not made against physics or economics or biology or psychology, all disciplines with vocabularies entirely closed to the uninitiated?

The answer is that those disciplines are understood to be up to something and to be promising a payoff that will someday benefit even those who couldn’t read a page of their journals. What benefit do literary studies hold out to those asked to support them? Not much of anything except the (parochial) excitement experienced by those caught up in arcane discussions of the mirror stage, the trace, the subaltern and the performative. (Don’t ask.) The general public, which includes legislators, trustees, and parents, is on the side of my colleague at Johns Hopkins. Let them put on plays.

Of the justifications for humanistic study offered in the comments, two seemed to me to have some force. The first is that taking courses in literature, philosophy and history provides training in critical thinking. I confess that I have always thought that “critical

thinking” is an empty phrase, a slogan that a humanist has recourse to when someone asks what good is what you do and he or she has nothing to say. What’s the distinction, I have more than occasionally asked, between critical thinking and just thinking? Isn’t the adjective superfluous? And what exactly would “uncritical thinking” be? But now that I have read the often impassioned responses to my column, I have a better understanding of what critical thinking is.

Taking as an example the concept of IQ, [William Haboush](#) says that while a scientist will use it, a humanist “will ask what does it mean? Is it one thing or many? Who made up the questions used in measuring it.” This, then, is critical thinking – the analytic probing of formulas, precepts and pieces of received wisdom that too often go unexamined and unchallenged. This skill, [Warren Call](#) claims, is taught in humanities courses where students “analyze ideas, differing viewpoints, justifications, opinions and accounts” and, in the process, learn how to “construct a logical assessment . . . and defend their conclusions with facts and lucid argument.”

That certainly sounds like a skill worth having, and I agree that it can be acquired in courses where literary texts, philosophical arguments and historical events are being scrutinized with an eye to seeing what lies beneath (or to the side of) their surfaces. But it also can be, and is, acquired elsewhere. Right now millions of TV viewers are acquiring it when they watch Chris Matthews or George Will or Cokie Roberts analyze the current political moment and say things like, “It would be wrong to draw any long run conclusion from Hilary Clinton’s victory in New Hampshire because in other states the voting population is unlikely to be 57 percent female and 97 percent white,” or “If we are to understand the immigration debate, we must go back the great waves of immigration in the late 19th and early 20th centuries,” or “Homelessness is not a single problem, but a nest of problems that cannot be solved piecemeal.”

You can hear the same kind of thinking on sports radio, where host and callers-in debate the ingredients that go to make up a successful team. And critical thinking is what tens of thousands of preachers encourage every week in their sermons when they ask parishioners to slow down and reflect on the impulses, perhaps obscure to them, driving their everyday behavior.

So two cheers for critical thinking, but the fact that you can learn how to do it in any number of contexts means that it cannot be claimed for the humanities as a special benefit only they can supply. Justification requires more than evidence that a consumer can get a

desirable commodity in your shop, too; it requires a demonstration that you have the exclusive franchise.

The second justification for studying the humanities that in my view has some force speaks to those of us who have been trapped in conversations with people who, after “How about those Bears?” (the equivalent of “hello” in Chicago), can think of nothing to say. [EM observes](#) that “being exposed to great ideas from variety of fields . . . and learning how to think critically all make for a more interesting and informed person” and that “lots of people want interesting and informed people as their friends, lovers and employees.” Amen. Count me as one of those who would welcome an increase in the number of those who can be relied on to enliven a dinner party rather than kill it (although I have seen dinner parties killed by the most erudite and sophisticated person at the table). But it won't do as a defense society will take seriously to say, *Let's support the humanities so that Stanley Fish and his friends have more people to talk to.*

One final point. [Nguyen Chau Giao asks](#), “Dr. Fish, when was the last time you read a poem . . . that so moved you to take certain actions to improve your lot or others?” To tell the truth, I can't remember a single time. But I can remember countless times when I've read a poem (like Herbert's “Matins”) and said “Wow!” or “Isn't that just great?” That's more than enough in my view to justify the enterprise of humanistic study, but I cannot believe, as much as I would like to, that the world can be persuaded to subsidize my moments of aesthetic wonderment.

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Jason Burke Murphy January 13, 2008 · 11:00 pm

Perhaps this alternative source of pleasure is itself worth subsidizing. Pursuing the pleasures of medieval philosophy or Chinese literature bears less risk of trouble than pursuit of other pleasures. It has helped me, despite a lack of monetary compensation.

You cited the talk of pundits as an example of critical thinking. One of the most valuable points I make in the classes I get to teach is that there is another kind of arguing in which participants are expected to find the strongest versions of differing arguments and respond. Many of my students just didn't think there was much else

besides the ridicule and scarecrow-toppling that is found in most op-ed pages and talk shows.

And another point: I can't help but think that someone who can appreciate Ralph Ellison or James Joyce is more capable of being considerate of other people's testimony and arguments. It is by virtue of films, novels, and philosophers that I've been able to guess how our house-to-house searches, random arrests, and torture sessions in occupied countries are making people feel. Sure, some very cultured people are part of the planning behind these moves. But they wouldn't be able to get away with "they just hate our freedom" if their audience has a similar store.

malnicore January 13, 2008 · 11:38 pm

Dr. Fish, I think you said all there was to say when you said "There is nothing more to say, and anything that is said – even when it takes the form of Kronman's inspiring cadences – diminishes the object of its supposed praise." As Ken Kesey's father once told him, perhaps "Your problem is you keep on trying to unscrew the unscrewtable."

Jon January 13, 2008 · 11:47 pm

Whats the problem with studying humanities in college? Simple: the search for deeper meaning of the human condition, for wisdom, for enriching the human soul through history, prose or philosophy should be what human beings endeavour to do regardless of their profession.

I'm a Computer Science major at one of the most competitive universities in the world. Undergraduates have a saying with regards to our Humanities school (Humanities and Social Science): "H&SS makes for less stress". The intellectual rigor and academic demands in the school is plainly less. I've been awake for 65 hours straight at times chasing programming bugs, on top of the weeks the program took to complete. In my humanities required courses, I never had to put nearly as much effort to get the same results.

And that is what it comes down to: my major is in preperation for my career. My interests in the humanities, particularly in history is just a hobby. And that, to be frank, is how I see people persuing humanities degrees – wasting time and money, because they are simply majoring in what I do in my spare time.

Alex Langlinais January 14, 2008 · 12:13 am

Dr. Fish's assessment that critical thinking skills can be aquired while watching Hardball or listening to sports radio seems dubious. Watching TV and listening to the radio involves a level of passivity that, I think, is somewhere near the polar opposite of critical thinking. At best one could learn how to parrot the analysis one receives from media, but one cannot thereby learn how to be analytical. Critical thinking requires engagement.

The evidence of this is empirical. Does anyone suppose that there is no difference between George Will and the viewer who watches George Will at home? If one could acquire critical thinking skills by consuming media, then the critical thinking skills of the average American who watches four hours of television per day would be on par with a professor of philosophy.

It is true that the critical thinking faculty can be cultivated outside of humanities departments but Dr. Fish uses poor examples of possible alternatives.

Joseph Billotti January 14, 2008 · 12:26 am

Right on! I will never forget the moment, when after spending countless hours doing homology computing, I performed the calculations and subtracted everything from the plane except the holes. The excitement of the insight was overpowering. Every non-mathematician I tried to tell at lunch thought me crazy.

Tony Waters January 14, 2008 · 12:27 am

The humanities are the only escape from the nihilism which results from pushing the response of "what is it good for?" to its logical end since, after all, we all end up dead in the end. This is a truth at least as old as Ecclesiastes. Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* complained that such a narrowly utilitarian world only ends in pleasure seekers without heart that it in its conceit imagines that nothing better has ever been created.

The response to this conundrum is found in the humanities, and its celebration of beauty. Which is why, I think, so many of my engineering friends find such satisfaction in music, art, and other humanistic pursuits. The problem is that it says nothing about why so much nihilism is nevertheless found in humanities departments!

Michael Wayne Harris January 14, 2008 · 12:30 am

Professor Fish,

I do have a question about the study of rhetoric. The ability to understand the process through which all enterprises wrap themselves in vocabularies, categories and epistemologies seems like a skill that is granted through the study of rhetoric. I would even go so far as to say that studying rhetoric can claim a franchise (or at least something very close to it) on granting that skill.

The ability to recognize those processes is something that is useful in many areas that have nothing to do with the study of rhetoric. Asking "what counts as evidence or as proof?" in any field (science, economics, etc) is practically helpful.

So it seems like, at least in the case of this one part of the humanities, justification along the lines you have rejected is possible. Would you say that I have made a category mistake in calling studying rhetoric a part of studying the humanities, or that I'm mistaken in arguing that it has a franchise on that ability?

Marc January 14, 2008 · 12:36 am

I'll sidestep Fish's arguments that the humanities must be their only measure. Leaving aside medieval astrology for the moment, without the humanities, what media would we watch on our new (scientifically engineered) flat-screen TVs? No *Daily Show*? No *Colbert*? No *South Park*? No *Sopranos*? No *Wire*? Even the Greeks had their *Aeschylus*. The Humanities, by whatever meandering roads they take, are what provide the stories, the satire, the social critiques that help us look

back at our own lives, the ones we're living even when we're not at that moment contributing to wigits of economic output, or practicing those sacred rites of enlightened democratic political discourse (which of course we all do daily, no?). The humanities, for whatever little other value it has, provides the backdrop from which the videos of youtube (and even youporn) draw their meaning. Now, fond of meaning as I am, I still don't know exactly how many dollars of a university budget should go towards medieval astrology, or Italian-American Culinary Culture, or how many credits prospective MBAers should be required to take from literary theoreticianalysts—which are the questions at root to this enquiry.

That the humanities are valuable (not only to me, but to my culture), seems a simple question. Books sell, Hollywood sells, and even one or two books of poetry are sold a year. How to train the future Hemingways and Faulkners? Medieval astrology seems as good a bet as any.

paul January 14, 2008 · 12:41 am

And yet some curricula within the Humanities are organized in such a way that the point is not simply “moments of aesthetic wonderment” but the teaching of specific sets of “critical” skills—certain modes of thinking, reading, looking, listening, etc. Though those modes may be found in (and learned from) things like sports talk radio or political talking-headery, judging from the very low quality of most of the thinking on display in those situations, and the fact that they only rarely seem aimed at truly educating their audiences, the specific practical skills taught and honed in Humanities classrooms seem really *only* to be taught there, or taught well there. Close reading Herbert, or Fish, does not come naturally to most of us. I'm a big fan of Prof. Fish's posts, including this one, and am in deep agreement with the idea that the academic Humanities (my own professional world) must not be judged by the terms provided by science, engineering, cooking, etc. I also agree that good teaching and reading of good literary and philosophical texts is not enough to give one a “correct” view of the world (thank goodness, or thank the human mind). But the idea that we academic Humanists do not provide an important and practical service to the culture—to society—one worthy of public support, seems simply wrong. After all, where would the next generation of shallow talking heads and sports radio ranters come from?

Robert Simola January 14, 2008 · 12:43 am

What good are the humanities? They are for the eight hours we are not working or sleeping. The humanities help up become more human and more humane. They help us become a part of the main. They enlarge us and help us contain multitudes. They are for getting the connections inherent in books and television programs, editorials and music and political debates. What use are the humanities? They are both the mortar and building blocks that define our society; the common threads, the warp and weft of the fabric that make us who we are as a people.

Dustin Plotnick January 14, 2008 · 12:45 am

Stanley Fish fails to adequetely address the problem of funding and the humanities because he asks the wrong question. Rather than “why should the humanities be funded,” he ought to ask “why are the humanities funded.” The answer, simply enough, is that they hold value to people and institutions with enough money to

fund them. This indicates that they hold value to society at large, or at least, to a portion of that society.

Through revealed preferences, we see that there are many disparate things that hold value to different people. Material consumption, health, sex, and status all figure prominently near the top of that list. We can value the different levels of utility condoned by these commodities through income (the present quantity of the commodity) and substitution (the trade-off, material or otherwise, with other commodities) effects. Given the basic principle of diminishing returns, we rightly conjecture that a person with a high level of material consumption will find an incremental change in a differing commodity, eg. status, more valuable than an incremental change in material consumption of the same cost. Put bluntly, the wealthy have incentive to become patrons of the humanities (artistic and scholarly) through learning and monetary donations, because they derive real utility from those pursuits. Flipping the coin, people with low levels of material consumption value incremental changes in material consumption more highly, and are therefore more likely to enter pursuits with a higher likelihood of increasing material consumption. The answer to the question "why is it so hard to come up with funding for the arts and humanities in public institutions?" should be obvious. It is not a reflection of the value of humanities to society, but rather, the value of humanities to the market those public institutions serve.

This answer may seem dissatisfying because it fails to address the value of humanities on its own terms, but rather equates it with all those other things that people consume. The question of purpose (that is, with a capital P) is entirely omitted. Fish, it seems, is entirely preoccupied with this question. He is, after all, a student of the humanities. Given the near limitless set of subjects to which this question could be applied (what is the purpose of HD television, what is the purpose of living until your ninety, what is the purpose of God, religion, humor, the internet, war, poetry, lawyers, etc etc) it seems positively unfair (and also arrogant) to apply so rigorous a standard to only a few particular fields of study (arrogant, given that they are your own).

This answer may also seem unsettling because it appears to reduce humanities to a leisure activity of the rich. Though such inference is not flatly incorrect, it projects moral thought onto an economic model describing the way the world does work, not the way it should work. If the world were to be a different way than it is, or the way this model describes it, that, then, would be a cause for real concern. It would be more productive, if one were so inclined, to attempt to change the way society values particular commodities. However, to say that there is no value behind asking why there is purpose in the humanities must certainly be wrong, for clearly there is a market behind such pontification

Dustin Plotnick

Steve January 14, 2008 · 12:58 am

In a certain sense, there is no argument against Professor Fish's arguments. From a utilitarian point of view, it is hard to justify the humanities. To a thorough-going utilitarian, it might even be hard to justify the pure sciences and theoretical math. But Professor Fish points toward one possible justification almost in spite of himself. In this article, at least, he grants the value of poems, plays, philosophical tracts, etc. If those texts are valuable, then there must be some value in teaching,

editing, explicating them—for potential readers and writers. That the academic profession does not do enough of this and may in fact encourage bad, jargon-filled prose can rightly be called a problem—a problem worth addressing.

Jeffrey Sachs January 14, 2008 · 1:11 am

Simply put, Fish argues that the entire scholarly output of the humanities is, for lack of a better word, marginalia. In his analysis, professors of Shakespeare don't "produce" — they replicate, comment on, and endlessly rehash the same tired arguments about the same tired plays. Or worse, their enthusiasm leads them to distort a play's original meaning and reduce it to a shape unrecognizable to the Bard himself.

It's difficult to know what to make of this argument. How do we know what is marginalia and what is actually unique? Is Marx a gloss of Hegel? Is Lacan just rehashing Freud? To what extent were these men producing something new and to what extent were they merely commenting on something old?

Fish is, it seems to me, a humanities fundamentalist. He sees the endless commentary and study and elaboration by scholars of certain "truly unique works" socially useless. He operates in the same spirit as those who saw in the theologians of the Catholic Church an impediment to reading the clear, unambiguous message of the Bible. For the Bible alone, according to such men, is a unique and socially useful creation. All else (Jerome, Augustine, Aquinas, Moore) are mere distractions from the unambiguous meaning of the original text.

In any field, scholarly advancement is a painfully slow process. The line of minor historians who connect Thucydides to Gibbon is filled with people who study "medieval astrology, Renaissances [sic] iconography, 18th century political satire, and romantic theories of the imagination". No doubt Fish would have found their scholarly output incredibly boring, but you can't get from "The Peloponnesian War" to "Decline and Fall..." without them.

If Fish had his way, how would the disciplines progress? Merely on the shoulders of indisputably great men like Shakespeare who, says Fish, need no defending? Ought we just to close our eyes, keep our fingers crossed, and pray that every generation or two produces a man or woman of such outstanding genius that a truly important work can be summoned forth from the scholarly vacuum? Or, on the other hand, ought we to cultivate an environment in which thousands of people can discuss, debate, and research a succession of points that, while seemingly minor in social import, can on occasion burst forth and alter the course of history?

J January 14, 2008 · 1:17 am

To reason, to justify, to persuade, is what it means to "think critically" on a social level. You don't need to have exclusive rights over one function to claim it as your own; rights of property don't extend that far. Others would like to know what the humanities can do? Tell them every reason you can think of. Don't be. Don't shrug them off. There have been political benefits, there has been moral benefits, pleasure and enjoyment, but often times quite the opposite. The humanities is many things to many people and that, and only that, is what makes it so valuable. There is no reason to pick on things that the humanities do, and then preclude everything else as a false argument.

Jeffrey Sachs January 14, 2008 · 1:29 am

I'd also add that Fish completely misread my original post. I argued that the distinctions between the faculties (and thus of the fields) exist ONLY in faculty phone books and web pages. In the "real world", scholars mix all the time, where a philosopher of medical ethics (a fast growing field at the moment) might easily find herself in the faculties of law or medicine.

Considering I went out of my way to explicitly mention the importance of social science departments in the American academy, I have a hard time understanding how Fish could have ever concluded I was not directly addressing his broadside against America's colleges and universities. But then, I stopped being surprised by Stanley Fish years ago.

Jonathan January 14, 2008 · 1:30 am

Some years ago I met a distinguished professor who studied history by reading the texts of an order of monks (I can't remember which one) who were just about the only ones who recorded what was happening during an early period of our history. She is a wonderful, witty, sophisticated person who, I'm sure, deserves her status as a star humanities professor.

She described an evening spent with a group of very wealthy Texan oilmen (her husband's clients). During dinner one of the very large, very Texan men leaned over and asked her what she did. This was unusual, she told us, because most of the clients took no notice of her. Encouraged by his question, she told him (briefly) what she did.

His response was "What a lovely hobby."

When she told the story I laughed out loud, because she is a terrific story-teller. But later I reflected on it, and thought that in a sense the Texan was right. She and many others in the university have the great privilege of pursuing their "hobbies." I think it is good that they can and I believe that in some vague way it is good for our society that these pursuits are allowed. But I also agree that they have no real use except that the students who study with these professors are often more interesting to talk with than those who never study humanities.

Although I agree with Fish that trying to justify the humanities of utilitarian grounds is a losing cause, I do want to take issue with his argument that if humanities made you a better person, professors in the humanities would be the best people around. This isn't fair because reading Shakespeare (etc.) and even studying the works in class for a while, is very different from devoting your life to it. Those who do the latter typically get involved in arcane disputes and analyses that have nothing to do with the enjoyment of the literature. Maybe, just maybe, some exposure to the humanities is good for students (while too much may be bad).

Leo Torib io January 14, 2008 · 1:40 am

You have a point Dr Fish.

But why single out the humanities (other than they encompass your chosen field)? Have you not heard of what has been described as, "Toribio's Law?" It goes something like this:

“Schooling is what we pursue until we learn to forget how truly ignorant we are. The wise man pursues education in spite of his schooling.”

lmt

Larry Rigby January 14, 2008 · 1:46 am

At Johns Hopkins I was just finishing up my Ph.D. in 18th century German Lit when Affirmative Action was phased in. My dream job of becoming a Stanley Fish evaporated. Since then I have founded 6 successful biomedical companies and published a widely-read novel about a 21st century Faustus. It is important to note that it was only after I had worked my way up Maslow's pyramid that I had the leisure to write the novel. Up until then I was learning how to interpret a balance statement, read a financial term sheet and hire engineers (and figure out how to make them communicative human beings, in general). So now I have the “useless” education and library of an academic while feeling a fat pocketbook in my hind pocket.

So I agree with Fish that one has little time to think of Goethe or Kant or rely on them when payroll is coming up or “barbarian” venture capitalists are whittling down one's equity.

I disagree with Fish about the necessity of elaborating on the obvious, i.e. that the humanities receive the lowest funding and why that is the status quo. But Fish is himself a businessman and rainmaker. He is indirectly in the business of selling newspapers, which is why he (the sly, ironic fox) has stooped so low to assume the contrarian position in an obvious fact that is otherwise an unworthy object his writing.

One conclusion of merit has come out of all this blogging: professors of humanities GENERALLY are sorry types (thank God for Affirmative Action that forced me into business!) and this is a topic of discussion that Fish should have devoted more time to—how to rectify this deplorable state.

As for me, my resolve is to endow three or four chairs of humanities in primarily poor, technically oriented state schools and stipulate only that the occupiers of those chairs (a) NOT be published and (b) have the highest ability for teaching. The endowment will provide the highest salary in the competitive academic market.

Kman January 14, 2008 · 2:01 am

“teach me thy love to know . . . Then by a sunbeam I will climb to thee.” This seems to me also an allusion to philosophy, specifically Platonic philosophy. “Thy love to know” almost equals Greek ‘philosophia’, and the progression of the individual to ‘thee’ could be read as a paraphrase of the Platonic ascent to the ‘Good’ (later conveniently read by Christians as ‘God’). In any case, the whole phrase, if not a direct allusion to Plato, smacks of Neoplatonism, itself a foundation for Christian theology (thus the Good -> God move). Either way, one always goes back to Plato. A bit more on him later. But on critical thinking, an assertion based on 14 years of teaching. One can't learn critical thinking from watching talking heads on TV as well as one can learn it in a good humanities class. That difference is one of degree, contingent on the course (both professor and students). My students, I'm convinced, are smarter, better critical thinkers after taking a course with me (at

least the ones who paid attention!) than individuals who have never taken such a class. They may or may not be better people, but they are better thinkers. Now back to Plato. Steven Pinker, in today's most emailed NY Times' article, "The Moral Instinct," seems to make a most persuasive (if somewhat oblique) reference for the value of the humanities with respect to their influence on the sciences on p. 7 of his article when he references Plato's "Euthyphro" and (a bit later) the often-maligned Platonic forms with respect to how they might contribute to new perspectives in approaching the science of ethics/morality.

Rich Joffe January 14, 2008 · 2:10 am

"Humanities for the sake of the humanities" is neither more achievable nor more worthy of society's financial support than is "humanities for the sake of changing the world" though, for obvious reasons, certain persons will favor one rather than the other. Human potential is maximized only by endeavors that equally emphasize the self and the other, and, indeed, no human endeavor can entirely exclude either of these values without becoming inhuman. Professor Fish's post modern ideology has dominated the humanities for at least 30 years without maturing or evolving, and, by now, it would be boring, if its stranglehold on academia were not also offensive.

Mark K. January 14, 2008 · 2:24 am

I recall a conversation I once had that resembled some of those that Fish recounts.

A friend of mine was debating whether to continue work towards an advanced degree in computer science or to accept an offer of admission to medical school. He shared with me that he felt that he was in a great position, because whichever field he chose there would always be someone in need of his services. He would have a great career because he would be of eminent utility. He then turned to me and asked, "How exactly do you justify your graduate work in the humanities? Will anyone ever need you and the work that you aim to do?"

I answered that scholars of the humanities are society's Cadillacs or BMWs when compared to the more practical pick-up trucks or station wagons of medicine and computer science. Nobody needs a Cadillac or a BMW, but plenty of people want them. Society does not need the humanities, rather the humanities are a social luxury that by their very presence make the culture as a whole feel richer.

Parenthetically, I should add that my friend found my answer unconscionable, and told me that I should never take a job at a public university. He said that if he knew that his tax dollars were paying the salaries of louts like me, he would feel compelled to start a revolt.

In a different vein, I would also suggest that the US is a world leader in both the production and the consumption of popular culture, and that our success in those two arena is, at least in part, a testament to the place of the humanities in our higher education system.

Corey January 14, 2008 · 2:25 am

As an Orthodox Jew, I find Dr. Fish's argument to be strikingly similar to the Jewish concept of "Torah L'shma" – studying the Torah is to be done for it's own sake, to

gain greater erudition, and not for any practical purpose. This is the reason for the existence, both in this country and abroad, of Yeshivas where thousands of adult students – lifelong students in many cases – spend their days poring over the vast corpus of Jewish texts written over millenia. The system is self sustaining – it produces a few outstanding scholars who in turn teach the next generation – and is not intended to sustain anything *other* than it's own existence. Ultimately, though, the rationale for all of this study is religious and the belief that there is a higher purpose to gaining such knowledge, even if there are no practical or measurable consequences.

Academic humanities cannot appeal to such a notion of transcendental utility, and must be justified from the perspective of secular humanism. With all due respect to Dr. Fish, this essay isn't much of a defense. As a scientist, I admit that I am partial to the view of Dr. Fish's colleague from Johns Hopkins. I love literature (in particular, I love Victorian novels, but that's irrelevant) and the theater, but I can't see the purpose in the deep analysis of these texts that goes on in the academic humanities. Shakespeare moves me; criticism of Shakespeare leaves me cold. Dr. Fish agrees that there is no measurable utility in such work, but insists that no such justification is needed. My critical thinking skills (sharpened by scientific training just as they might have been sharpened by advanced training in the humanities) tell me to beware of such an unbacked assertion. Why should the humanities get a free pass?

Phil January 14, 2008 · 2:48 am

Dr. Fish,

In your defense of the autonomy of the Humanities, you are making a public statement with social and even economic consequences. You demonstrate “the exclusive franchise” of “the enterprise of humanistic study” by chatting interpretations of the literary cannon alongside the plebs of the Times. Your thread defending the humanistic endeavor on its own terms has, practically speaking, generated a space outside of academia where ideas can be profitably engaged. Are you not too humble to find this an admirable act? One might well ask, whether this discussion provides any end value? I say yes. You have challenged the ideological commodification of learning, a tremendously valuable feat as our schools weather the age of “no child left behind.” I embrace your efforts to share the beauty of the humanities with the public and in a public context, as well as those of many of your blogging colleagues I might add. Indeed, when I read the news or the latest historiography, I do not expect a clear moral sermon. I do, however, want to learn something new, and I wish that the scholarship of the humanities would find ways to appear more often on in today's headlines. Although you are not required to do chime to be paid as an academic, I suspect you must derive some pleasure (and even added financial compensation) by explaining the value of your “moments of aesthetic wonderment.” I think you have begun to discover an economy of enlivened dinner conversations underneath the demands of consumerism, but do not yet fully appreciate its worth.

Tom Vincent January 14, 2008 · 2:52 am

Two points I would like to add;

The first is that, although I seriously question the assertion that American TV commentators are engaged in “critical thinking” as opposed to just covering their

rear ends, listening to someone engaged in critical thinking is not at all the same as engaging in it oneself. To learn critical thinking, there must be some fora wherein it is required to be practiced. However, you are correct in asserting that humanities departments are not the only places in which that might take place.

More saliently, the study of humanities, does equip people to analyze, and possibly in some measure accept, ideas other than those propagated within their community or culture. While it might be fun to maintain that the rise in evangelical “faith based” thinking has some correlation to the decline over the decades of humanities departments, what’s more important is how those versed in analyzing various philosophies and perspectives communicate with those who hold non-native ideas – in very much the way you outlined at the beginning of this column.

The basis of my profession is moving from culture to culture, and without the capacity to understand and accept (without necessarily agreeing with) other perspectives is essential, and something that few disciplines encourage outside the humanities. To study what someone says, how and why they say it, what arguments they consider relevant (even if apparently counterintuitive or “illogical”), prepares one to listen more completely and hopefully more constructively to differing viewpoints.

Amartya Sen and others offer impressive and beautiful insights into democracy. Those perspectives might not necessarily be relevant or appreciated in the US context, but in discussing democracy with other cultures around the world (in African or Latin American villages, or in the CIS), an awareness of those arguments presents an opportunity for a much fuller dialogue beyond just “this is the way we do it, and so that is the way you must do it”. And practice(!) in the art of critical thinking allows for spirited give and take – and a mutual awareness that ideas have been exchanged, not just shouted at each other.

That is an art, or discipline, sorely lacking in US foreign policy, and apparently in US local politics as well. And while studying humanities certainly will not create world peace and mutual understanding, it is certainly capable of helping.

Alan January 14, 2008 · 2:54 am

A fundamental role of humanities studies as well as any academic discipline is to put new knowledge on the shelf where others can browse and learn. This role is often forgotten in the sciences where the emphasis in recent decades has been on discoveries that can be translated more or less directly into commercial benefit. The richness in the human experience is so great that we need people who can distill it, who can extend it and who can reinterpret it. Otherwise, we cannot benefit from the experience. This is what the humanities do best. Just because we cannot directly link inputs to outputs does not mean that the benefits are not there. How many of us draw knowledge and inspiration from a leisurely afternoon at a bookstore? Need every author justify her work by its potential use?