

The Value of a Liberal Arts Education

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Abstract

In recent years, liberal arts education has faced caustic challenges on the grounds that it is neither a wise investment nor relevant in the modern era. However, these claims disregard the contention that liberal arts education has an intrinsic value that supersedes other tertiary concerns. The benefits of a liberal arts education are certainly comprehensive and apply to all members of society. As such, the inherent merit of the liberal arts must be recognized and supported by the state at all educational levels. The current economic and political environment has made it apparent that anything less will severely undermine the solemn standing of the liberal arts. If we are to repudiate the liberal arts, we will deny the very essence of what makes us human.

Introduction

As I write this, some American universities are severely scaling back or even closing humanities departments like Classical Studies and Romance Languages. In the U.K., funding for higher education in the humanities has been drastically cut (Morgan). Some of the logic behind these cuts lies in the idea that the humanities are a luxury good that cannot be afforded in difficult economic times, and that in an increasingly competitive and global economy, countries are better served by focusing on disciplines related to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Meanwhile, some “Occupy” protesters in different cities have decried a system that led them to take on thousands of dollars in student loans in pursuit of degrees that have not been well-received by potential employers. On the other side of this debate, Rush Limbaugh has blamed universities, saying that they “offer useless majors, and then they lie about the quality of these useless majors. They lie about the happiness and the jobs and the money that awaits you after you get a degree in something like Classical Studies.” The one thing these widely varying views share is that they all approach the idea of liberal arts education as something to be debated in terms of its pure economic value.

I will argue that liberal arts education has an inherent value that transcends economic and political conditions. The liberal arts are good for our soul, our view of the world, and our innate creativity. In light of difficult funding decisions that educational institutions face, this inherent value must be recognized to ensure the continued survival of the liberal arts. While the liberal arts can be defended in terms of their benefits for national prosperity

and good democratic citizens, this view stops short by giving liberal arts education an instrumental rather than an inherent value. My argument is not based on a paternalistic view, and I will seek to defend it against the possible objection that claiming an inherent value for liberal arts violates liberal neutrality. Given this inherent value, I will argue that states should not debate the stages or types of education which should include liberal arts components, but should seek to ensure an emphasis on the liberal arts at all levels of education. I believe that while the debate around the liberal arts often focuses on their place in higher education, it is critical to support their place in elementary education as well. The inherent benefits that I argue for apply for all people in society.

Defining “Liberal Arts”

In order to take a side in the debate about the value of a liberal arts education, it is necessary to provide a definition of a liberal arts education. In fact, this very exercise may calm the doubts of some skeptics before my larger argument for the inherent value of a liberal arts education. It would seem that sometimes those who decry the supposed uselessness of the liberal arts might hold misconceptions about what they so vehemently argue against.

I will use a definition eloquently argued for by Matthew Arnold in the late nineteenth century. Arnold was the two-time Chair of Poetry at Oxford and for much of his career the Inspector of Schools in England. Arnold says that the humanities are often criticized on the grounds that “the study is an elegant one, but slight and ineffectual; a smattering of Greek and Latin and other ornamental things, or little use for any one whose object is to get at truth and be a practical man” (246). He says that there is “always a tendency in those who are remonstrating against the predominance of letters in education to understand by letters *belles lettres* and by *belles lettres* a superficial humanism, the opposite of science or true knowledge” (246). He then goes on to clarify what he means by an education of letters, or rather a liberal arts education, by discussing the example of an education in Greek and Roman Antiquity, which in his time and ours is placed firmly in the realm of liberal arts disciplines. When Arnold speaks of knowing Greek and Roman antiquity as an aid for knowing ourselves and the world, he means “more than a knowledge of so much vocabulary, so much grammar, so many portions of authors in the Greek and Latin languages- [he means] knowing the Greeks and Romans, and their life and genius, and what they were and did in the world; what we get from them and what is its value” (246). This description, rather than characterizing a superficial sort of knowledge, is in fact consistent with the type of education that would allow people to understand greater truths.

Arnold goes on to say that the type of education he advocates for involves “knowing the best which has been thought and uttered in the world” (247). Arnold says that by speaking of “knowing ancient Rome,” he does not mean “knowing merely more or less of Latin belles lettres and taking no account of Rome’s military and political and legal and administrative work in the world.” By knowing ancient Greece, he means “knowing her as the giver of Greek art and the guide to a free and right use of reason and to scientific method, and the founder of our mathematics and physics and astronomy and biology” and “knowing her as all this and not merely knowing certain Greek poems and histories and treatises and speeches- so as to the knowledge of the modern nations also” (247). Essentially, he describes what a modern liberal arts university would include under the heading of a Classical Studies degree. Such a course of study does not focus on literary texts at the exclusion of historical context, archaeological knowledge, and philosophical background. I will choose to adhere to this definition during my argument. A liberal arts education brings its pupils a uniquely rich depth and breadth of knowledge, and in the latter sections of this paper I will examine the inherent values of these virtues for the students.

The State’s Role in Education

In order to provide support for the idea that the state should have a role in supporting certain types of education, it is important to examine philosophical views towards education, particularly when viewed through the lens of equality of opportunity. John Rawls, a leading twentieth century political philosopher, discusses the importance of equality of opportunity in ensuring a just society in his influential work *A Theory of Justice*. Rawls says “those who are at the same level of talent and ability and have the same willingness to use them, should have the same prospects of success regardless of their initial place in the social system, that is, irrespective of the income class into which they were born” (63). Following from Rawls’s idea, it seems clear that if a democratic state wants to ensure people this freedom, the state should take a significant amount of responsibility for education, which provides a pathway to later success in life. If people of all income levels have equality of opportunity in education, this would give them the chance to transcend the social circumstances into which they are born. Unfortunately, many people live in circumstances that place barriers in the way of their social mobility and access to education. If certain groups of people are systematically excluded from having access to education, this will exclude these groups from the possibility of social mobility, since education provides an avenue to later opportunities in life.

When people suffer from a cumulative disadvantage caused by

inadequate access to education, they will be severely restricted in their freedom to pursue the kind of life they want (in terms of careers, leisure activities, etc.). In accordance with Rawls's principles of justice, the state should seek to ensure educational access for its citizens. When people have inadequate access to education, it will be impossible to fulfill part of Rawls's second principle: positions and offices will not truly be open to all based on fair equality of opportunity because many people will lack the education to be eligible for such offices and positions.

In an opposing view, Nozick would claim that education does not fall within the realm of services the minimal state should provide, nor would he think that it is the role of the state to rectify inequalities that may arise from a lack of educational opportunities. I do not propose to examine Nozick's idea of just acquisitions in terms of economic resources and whether or not they should be redistributed to ensure a just society, but his transactional principles do not seem completely compatible with a social good such as education. His work particularly opposed taxation, saying that it is "on a par with forced labor" (169). Since taxation is the means by which a large portion of public education is supported, it would seem that Nozick's model does not allow for a state role in education. However, as Scanlon points out, in Nozick's model "citizens may band together for whatever other purposes they may desire—to provide education, to aid the needy, to organize social insurance schemes—but such schemes must be purely voluntary, and the state must enforce any-one's right not to be compelled to contribute to them" (1).

Despite this possibility that groups of people within the minimal state could support education, leaving the choice open this way could have dire consequences. If people in the upper class banded together to support education, but only for their own children, citizens in the lower classes might not be able or encouraged to participate in this system. Since there is no redistributive mechanism to ensure that, for example, a revenue stream like property taxes could be used to fund public education, it seems probable that there would be an entire class of people who would not be ensured access to education. Education would become the privilege of the wealthy as opposed to the right of all citizens. In this situation, social stratification would increase, and there would be an entire class of relatively uninformed political participants (those without education), and this would lead to disenfranchisement. The class of people who did not have access to education would, in addition to missing out on the instrumental values of a liberal arts education, be deprived of the inherent values I argue for as well.

Citizenship Education

This basis for state support of education does not in itself clarify

what types of education should be supported. Education is often discussed in terms of its utility for creating good democratic citizens, an idea which appears in Rawls's work *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*. Rawls describes how citizenship education will be accomplished in a society, saying that "citizens acquire an understanding of the public political culture and its traditions of interpreting basic constitutional values" (145). According to Rawls, this is accomplished through judicial processes, such as the interpretation of constitutional cases and how these are affirmed by political parties. He says that "if disputed judicial decisions—there are bound to be such—call forth deliberative political discussion in the course of which their merits are reasonably debated in terms of constitutional principles, then even these disputed decisions, by drawing citizens into public debate, may serve a vital educational role" (146). Essentially, Rawls thinks that the political and judicial process themselves will be the primary tools through which citizens receive democratic education, and additional formal education in this area will not be required.

It seems unlikely that in all cases citizenship education will be ensured solely through participation in the political process, especially given that this idea depends on active efforts on the part of the citizens to participate in this level of deliberative processing. With the voter turnout rate in the U.S. hovering slightly above 60%, it seems unlikely that public debate will serve its intended educational role (McDonald). Additionally, even in their strongest formulation, his ideas have instrumental overtones. They are focused on citizenship education and the overall goal of allowing people to have equal opportunities to succeed, which is framed in career-based terms.

According to Costa, Rawls's neglect of this topic can be partly explained by "his confidence that the functioning of just institutions will 'spontaneously' generate, in citizens who live under them, the necessary support for principles of justice, and will encourage the development and exercise of the virtues characteristic of reasonable citizens" (56). When closely examined, this argument seems to have a circular structure. If citizens are necessary to contribute to a strong public political culture, but these same citizens derive their reasonable and virtuous nature from the political institutions they live under, then there would seem to be a basic component missing from democratic societies if the citizens do not have some basic access to democratic education. Participation in the democratic process is necessary, but it is by no means the same thing as formal education that fosters qualities necessary for democratic citizenship.

A report by the Carnegie Foundation called "Educating for Democracy: Preparing Undergraduates for Responsible Political Engagement" highlights

this shortfall. The report states “in a 2006 survey of California high school graduates who had recently completed a course in U.S. government, half could not correctly identify the function of the Supreme Court, a third could not name either of California’s two U.S. senators, and 41 percent did not know whether the Republican or Democratic party is more conservative. For the sake of these individuals and for the health of our democracy, it is critical to strengthen their understanding of political institutions, issues and events” (3). The report goes on to recommend that this could be accomplished at the university level, because “more than 15 million Americans from increasingly diverse backgrounds are enrolled as undergraduates in our nation’s colleges and universities” and “when undergraduates have the understanding and skills to be politically engaged, many are motivated to do so. Research suggests that colleges are well positioned to promote democratic competencies and participation, and to prepare students to be thoughtful, responsible, creative citizens” (3).

Another work that discusses education’s effects on democratic skills is Milton Friedman’s *Capitalism and Freedom*. Friedman believes that positive effects for the state will occur as a result of funding for higher education because it is “a means of training youngsters for citizenship and for community leadership,” and that subsidies should be provided for this type of education to individuals to spend at institutions of their choosing, which would “make for more effective competition among various types of schools and for a more efficient utilization of their resources” (99). He also discusses education at more basic levels, saying that “a stable and democratic society is impossible without a minimum degree of literacy and knowledge on the part of most citizens and without widespread acceptance of some set of values. Education can contribute to both.” Thus, he continues, “the gain from the education of a child accrues not only to the child or his parents but also to other members of the society” (86). This argument, although it does not rely solely on the benefit of education to economic prosperity but incorporates the benefits to democratic citizenship, is nonetheless highly instrumental. The value of liberal arts education lies in the benefit to the community, partly in the form of the stability in society that democratic education supposedly carries.

He goes on to state that “the qualitative argument from ‘neighborhood effects’ does not, of course, determine the specific kinds of schooling that should be subsidized or by how much they should be subsidized. The social gain presumably is greatest for the lowest levels of schooling, where there is the nearest approach to unanimity about content, and declines continuously as the level of schooling rises” (88). This essentially quantifies the marginal benefits of education. This approach would provide support for some form

of basic education for all, but by no means guarantees any access to higher education or a specific type of education unless it provides increasing marginal utility to the community.

Although his approach acknowledges that education is valuable for economic and political reasons, I think this framework would place some members of society at a severe disadvantage. Friedman states that “what forms of education have the greatest social advantage and how much of the community’s limited resources should be spent on them must be decided by the judgment of the community expressed through its acceptable political challenges” (89). Thus, if through the deliberative process it is decided that only basic literacy and mathematics education are necessary for the majority of the population, this framework would lead to a failure of equality. Quantifying education in terms of “greatest social advantage” deals with an idea of marginal benefit to individual people, and distributing education in a way that creates the greatest advantage would likely mean giving educational resources to people who are the most academically gifted. This instrumental view will exclude the less-advantaged members of a society. If the state chooses to support only basic education for the majority of the population, then many of the liberal arts disciplines will only be accessible to people who society deems the mostly likely to benefit from their study. The inherent values that I believe a liberal arts education provides are not limited to the most intelligent or economically advantaged members in a society, and thus Friedman’s practical conclusions fall short of my ideal view of the grounds for supporting liberal arts education.

Amy Gutmann’s work also articulates the qualities and benefits of education that can enhance democratic participation. Her views include the usefulness of education in forming moral character, which comes closer to the inherent values I will argue for, but still stops short by framing the value in instrumental terms. Gutmann cites Noah Webster’s idea that “education, in great measure, forms the moral character of men, and morals are the basis of government.” However, Webster goes on to say that “the only practicable method to reform mankind is to begin with children, to banish, if possible, from their company every low-bred, drunken, immoral character” (48-9). By acknowledging that in a democratic society, citizens “must be free to disagree over what constitutes low-bred and immoral character” (48), Gutmann adapts this into a more realistic and timely framework. Her version is that: “Education, in a great measure, forms the moral character of citizens, and moral character along with laws and institutions, forms the basis of democratic government. Democratic government, in turn, shapes the education of future citizens, which, in a great measure, forms their moral character. Because democracies must rely on the moral character of parents,

teachers, public officials, and ordinary citizens to education future citizens, democratic education begins not only with children who are to be taught but also with citizens who are to be their teachers" (48).

This idea of complete participation in democratic education to ensure participation in democracy emphasizes the need for this type of education throughout society.

Gutmann's description of this type of education makes it clear that it is consistent with that found in the liberal arts disciplines. Education that teaches democratic virtue is that which teaches people "the ability to deliberate, and hence to participate in conscious social reproduction" (46). She states that there are two basic facts about our lives, which are that "we disagree about what is good" and "we face hard choices as individuals even when we agree as a group." These two facts "are the basis for an argument that primary education should be both exemplary and didactic. Children must learn not just how to behave in accordance with authority but to think critically about how they are to live up to the democratic idea of sharing political sovereignty as citizens" (51). I believe that the deliberative skills and critical thinking necessary for these ideals can be found in the liberal arts disciplines. However, even valuing education for its benefits in a democratic society stops short of acknowledging the true worth of the humanities.

Inherent Value

In my freshman year Greek history class, the professor titled his first lecture "Why history matters." On one of the lecture slides he juxtaposed a picture of the famous kore, a statue of a Greek woman that resides in the Acropolis museum, with a picture of Brittney Spears. He posited that all learning is an antidote to popular culture. In our society, there is a profound importance to being able to recognize something that speaks to us more deeply than the drama on the latest episode of a reality T.V. show or the scandal over the latest celebrity divorce. I will argue that the inherent value of the humanities lies within this deeper and more profound sphere. The liberal arts have an inherent value for our souls, the way we view the world around us, and our innate creativity.

In Plato's Republic, Socrates provides an argument for the idea that education is good for our souls. The Socratic method of learning to recognize the good can be understood through the allegory of the cave, in which the prisoners in the cave gradually learn to recognize that the shapes they see are mere shadows, and eventually leave the cave to live in the light of the sun and recognize the highest form of good. However, after they have made this ascent, people "must be willing to go down again among those prisoners" to "share their labors and honors, whether they be slighter or more serious"

(519d). A Socratic method of learning is one that engages students actively in their own learning by guiding them towards lessons and truths while allowing them to ask questions and critically engage with the topics. Socrates' discussion of education indicates that the power of knowledge "is in the soul of each and that the instrument with which each learns--just as an eye is not able to turn toward the light from the dark without the whole body--must be turned around from that which is coming into being together with the whole soul until it is able to endure looking at that which is and the brightest part of that which is" (518c). This view emphasizes the fact that education is not just about giving someone a simple skill or a tool with which to accomplish certain tasks, but rather it is a holistic process that involves re-shaping the very soul of a person. I believe that this type of learning, one that engages people at the level of their very soul, is found within the liberal arts.

Another work that supports my argument for the inherent value of education is Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. He discusses education as a way to avoid the dehumanization that he views as a consequence of capitalism. He says that "in the progress of the division of labour, the employment of the far greater part of those who live by labour, that is, of the great body of the people, comes to be confined to a few very simple operations, frequently to one or two" (839). He describes the consequences of this, for as he argues, "the man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations, of which the effects too are, perhaps, always the same, or very nearly the same, has no occasion to exert his understanding, or to exercise his invention in finding out expedients for removing difficulties which will never occur." Such a man will in due course lose "the habit of such exertion, and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become" (839-40). When this occurs, "the torpor of his mind renders him, not only incapable of relishing or bearing a part in any rational conversation, but of conceiving any generous, noble, or tender sentiment, and consequently of forming any just judgment concerning many even of the ordinary duties of private life. Of the great and extensive interests of his country he is altogether incapable of judging" (840). Basic education is presented as a way to avoid this downward spiral. Thus, peoples' access to education allows them to connect with their humanity and become better citizens by understanding the larger interests of their country. The initial part of his argument approaches the point I will focus on because it deals with the qualities of human beings that exist outside of political and economic models. I think that the ability to conceive of the "generous, noble, or tender sentiment[s]" that Smith discusses presents a strong argument for the ways in which education can enrich our souls.

Martha Nussbaum provides a modern argument for the idea

that humanities education holds inherent value in addition to its role in promoting good democratic citizenship. She says that “when we meet in society, if we have not learned to see both the self and other in that way, imagining in one another inner faculties of thought and emotion, democracy is bound to fail, because democracy is built upon respect and concern, and these in turn are built upon the ability to see other people as human beings, not simply as objects” (6). This ability, while essential for democratic citizens, also has inherent value by virtue of strengthening peoples’ sense of their own humanity and enforcing the recognition of humanity in others.

Nussbaum argues that the humanities have an inherent value because they are good for our souls, and if we lose liberal arts education, we will forget our soul. She acknowledges that for many people this word has strong religious connotations, but she connects her arguments to Tagore’s and Alcott’s meanings and defines the soul as: “the faculties of thought and imagination that make us human and make our relationships rich human relationships, rather than relationships of mere use and manipulation” (6). One can find an echo of Smith’s idea that the humanities are necessary to prevent dehumanization: although society is not as stratified as it was in Smith’s time and not all of the working class are employed in jobs where they perform the same one or two tasks over and over again, we still run the risk of losing an integral part of ourselves if we neglect liberal arts education.

Nussbaum references the work of British pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott and his research on the developmental role that imaginative play has for children. She says that “as play develops, the child develops a capacity for wonder. Simple nursery rhymes already urge children to put themselves in the place of a small animal, another child, even an inanimate object” (96). The example she gives is the nursery rhyme “twinkle twinkle little star, how I wonder what you are.” She describes it as “a paradigm of wonder, since it involves looking at a shape and endowing that shape with an inner world. This is what children ultimately must be able to do with other people. Nursery rhymes and stories are thus a crucial preparation for concern in life” (97). Describing nursery rhymes as preparation for later intellectual and interpersonal connections in life might seem to tilt this argument towards the instrumental as well, yet the sense of wonder and imagination that is described in child’s play is ethereal and essentially impossible to quantify. I will choose to focus on the existence of the rhyme and the feeling itself as two sides of the same coin. Such natural wonder and curiosity are key components of the human condition, and any manifestation of these qualities should be seen as a manifestation of humanity itself.

Nussbaum says that as people get older, they can “close up, forgetting

the inner world of others, or they can retain and further develop the capacity to endow the forms of others, in imagination, with inner life" (98). In the first scenario, people are denying a part of what makes us human, while in the second they are enriching their very souls. In my view, if people are engaged in the liberal arts from an early point in their education and continue this engagement throughout their lives, they can continuously enrich their souls and their identity as human beings. Nussbaum says that "it is all too easy to see another person as just a body-which we might then think we can use for our own ends, bad or good" and "it is an achievement to see a soul in that body, and this achievement is supported by poetry and the arts, which as us to wonder about the inner world of that shape we see- and, too, to wonder about ourselves and our own depths." Thus, the liberal arts encapsulate the manifestation of humanity that imaginative play and nursery rhymes represent for small children. Failing to acknowledge this leads to the closing off that Nussbaum describes and the loss of our inner world.

I will now turn to the ways in which a liberal arts education has value for how we view the world around us. Mike Seymour states that the purpose of his work, *Education for Humanity*, is to make the case for "creating schools that are devoted to all dimensions of the human condition" in which "all students will be engaged collaboratively to succeed by a caring educational community" (ix). He says that the insight he argues for in his book is that "the separation of people from their deeper selves underlies all other forms of disconnection. Being disconnected from oneself hampers true connection to others, to the natural world, and to a higher meaning that gives a sense of hope and fulfillment" (11). The study of the humanities deals extensively with the study of the human condition. I believe that supporting the type of education he argues for will allow people to better connect to their true selves, and by extension form stronger connections to others and the world around them. Seymour says that "educating for self begins the journey to realize inner aliveness and purpose by finding ourselves through what we cherish and love" (33). Like the prisoners in Socrates' allegory of the cave, I think that all people are searching for the form of the good, and they will be unable to achieve it without the study of the liberal arts.

Arguing for the inherent value of the liberal arts by grounding it in the ethereal area of its good for the soul can be a difficult endeavor. For example, Mark Roche, a former dean of Notre Dame's College of Arts and Letters, points out that "when the value of a liberal arts education is defended today, educators normally elevate not its intrinsic value, which is simply too foreign to contemporary culture, but critical thinking, which is essential to success and crucial to the venerable enlightenment goal of dismantling false truths" (101). Yet the complexity of providing an inherent defense for

the liberal arts has not kept Roche and other authors from delving into this area. Indeed, I would be doing my own liberal arts background a disservice if I shied away from this area simply because it represents a more abstract argument. Defending the liberal arts for their inherent value is the only way to ensure their place in society regardless of the economic or political climate of a state.

The study of the liberal arts, in addition to being good for our souls, is beneficial for the way that we see and understand the world around us. Roche's argument includes the inherent good of the liberal arts both in an internal and external sense. Roche states that while a liberal arts education can "help us discover intrinsic goods, it is in itself an intrinsic good" (15). Thus, if a liberal arts education is not supported by a state, we lose an entire bundle of intrinsic goods: the inherent good represented by a liberal arts education itself and the other goods it guarantees. He goes on to say that a liberal arts education helps "students recognize the gap between the world as it is and the world as it ought to be while at the same time reconciling them to what is good and beautiful about the world they have inherited" (20). In recognizing this difference between the possible and the actual, students are engaged at a higher level of humanity and are able to ask broad-based questions about how and why things have come to be the way they are and whether and how to change them. Although this is a more complex question than a child wondering what a star is, it is nonetheless a question based on imagination and the ability to construct a better world in our minds and even attempt to help that world come to exist in reality.

Roche gives specific examples of how different areas in the liberal arts serve to elevate the way in which we view the world around us. He says that "art assists the individual's search for edification and contributes to the collective identity of a culture" and "offers a window not only into the collective identity of a given culture but also into the complexity and dignity of humankind and indeed onto the transcendent itself" (20). Additionally, "our experience of art and literature differs from the routine experience of consumption and utility. When we appreciate an object of beauty, we do not desire to possess or transform it, to consume or use it; we leave it free as it is. Our experience of literature is of value for its own sake. It is 'purposeless' in the higher sense of being its own end" (35). This relates closely to Nussbaum's discussion of the importance of maintaining a sense of wonder. Thus, the form of education that helps us learn how to appreciate things like art and literature as ends in themselves is in itself an intrinsic good. I believe that students who have had access to a liberal arts education will be better able to critically engage with the world around them and appreciate art and literature on a deeper level.

Victor Ferrall concurs with Roche that a liberal arts education is valuable for individuals and for the relationships that people form with one another. He says that a “society needs well and broadly educated citizens. The more liberally educated citizens it has, the stronger it will be. Individuals benefit from being well and broadly educated. The more they are liberally educated, the stronger they will be in both their personal and professional lives, and as citizens” (16). Liberal arts strengthen a society by improving the way in which people relate to one another, and this is accomplished by virtue of the fact that they strengthen its citizens as individuals. Although a stronger democratic society is certainly a worthy achievement, the argument need not progress that far: the liberal arts are good for individuals in a society by virtue of the fact that they have inherent good for the relationships between individuals regardless of their place in society or the type of society in which they live.

I will now examine the ways in which the liberal arts are valuable for our innate creativity. An argument for this can be found in the work of Ferrall and Roche in their discussions of how the humanities help people relate different areas of knowledge and demarcate their place in the world around them. In doing so, people are able to envision possibilities beyond their daily experiences and think more creatively. Roche says that “liberal arts students are encouraged to develop not only an awareness of knowledge intrinsic to their major but a recognition of that discipline’s position within the larger mosaic of knowledge” (20). Ferrall states that “a liberal education defines the relationship of its holders to the world around them” and that people who pursue such an education “are seldom satisfied with their level of knowing. They wonder, and bring their analytical resources and knowledge to bear on their wondering. The life of their minds is not limited by or to their daily experience. For them, the fact of not knowing can be a source of pleasurable challenge. Creativity is central to what they value” (17).

This creativity can be viewed as an effect of the different ways of understanding the world that the liberal arts inspires, but I believe that the two still represent separate inherent goods. I would posit that one can lead to the other in a cycle of innovation and appreciation for inner beauty. People who are inspired by a deep appreciation for art or literature may go on to create their own works of art, which can in turn be appreciated for others for the sake of their beauty. By allowing the “life of the mind” to transcend mere everyday experience, the liberal arts prevent us from experiencing the dehumanization against which Smith cautioned.

In an era where the liberal arts are challenged both in higher education and grade school curricula, it is important to prove to the skeptics that there is an inherent value to the liberal arts. However, there is yet

another approach to the defense of the liberal arts, and it lies in what comes down to an eloquent version of pleading the Fifth. Stanley Fish says that, “To the question ‘of what use are the humanities?,’ the only honest answer is none whatsoever. And it is an answer that brings honor to its subject. Justification, after all, confers value on an activity from a perspective outside its performance. An activity that cannot be justified is an activity that refuses to regard itself as instrumental to some larger good. The humanities are their own good.” Fish goes on to say that in some ways he knows he is asking the world “to subsidize [his] moments of aesthetic wonderment” when he sees a beautiful piece of art or reads a moving poem. At first glance this might sound self-centered, but upon closer examination, it can be completely egalitarian. After all, why should everyone not experience this same sense of wonder when seeing a painting or reading a passage of literature that speaks to them? Supporting the idea that the liberal arts have an inherent value is not a matter of subsidizing one person’s tastes, but rather involves recognizing something integral to our humanity. Far from being a useless luxury good, the humanities are essential to our identities as humans.

Objections to the Inherent Value

If the state acknowledges liberal arts education and supports its inherent value, this could be seen by some as a value judgment of one type of education over another. I am not arguing that all people must be required to pursue a liberal arts degree in college, but rather that the liberal arts must be ensured a permanent place in society and at all levels of education. However, it could be argued that this view violates liberal neutrality. After all, who am I to say that Greek statues are inherently superior to Britney Spears?

Some might respond to the view that Fish espoused in the last section by arguing that they have no obligation to subsidize other peoples’ enjoyment of the arts, or education that focuses on subjects like art and literature, if they do not enjoy such things. Bentham and Mill also debated the issue of whether all pleasures are equal. Bentham takes a utilitarian point of view in qualifying different types of enjoyment, while Mill takes a perfectionist view that some types of pleasures are superior to others. I will use their arguments to support the idea that regardless of whether all pleasures are weighted equally, a range of options must be allowed to exist in order to give people the opportunity to choose the types of pleasures that bring them the most fulfillments.

Bentham’s equivalent example of the Greek statue and Britney Spears was the comparison between reading poetry and the game of push-pin. He said that, “prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the

arts and sciences of music and poetry. If the game of push-pin furnished more pleasure, it is more valuable than either. Everybody can play push-pin: poetry and music are relished only by a few" (93). In fact, he goes on to say that the preference of poetry to push-pin could even be conceived as elitist, because "if poetry and music deserve to be [sic] preferred before a game of push-pin, it must be because they are calculated to gratify those individuals who are most difficult to be pleased" (94). I acknowledge that it is entirely possible that someone could gain equal or even greater enjoyment from push-pin over poetry, as they could gain equal or even greater enjoyment from Britney Spears over Greek statues. However, while games and pop music may be more accessible or more appealing for some, they do not require any additional support in the way that poetry and art do. Market forces will not always be kind to the arts, and I believe that a societal commitment to the liberal arts is necessary to ensure that people have the opportunity to appreciate things like poetry, art, and classical music.

While Mill takes the perfectionist view that some pleasures are inherently superior to others, I believe that his argument can also be used to illustrate the necessity of ensuring that the higher pleasures are available to all in society. Mill states it was "quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognize the fact that some kinds of pleasures are more desirable and valuable than others. It would be absurd that, while in estimating all other things quality is considered as well as quantity, the estimation of pleasure should be supposed to depend on quantity alone" (Mill 8). In order to make this qualitative distinction, he said that "of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, that is the more desirable pleasure" (8). Thus, he argues that people who do not appreciate higher pleasures have simply not had the chance to enjoy them and are not making a fully informed choice. Mill describes higher pleasures as ones that engage our uniquely human capacities, and says that "those who are equally acquainted with and equally capable of appreciating and enjoying both do give a most marked preference to the manner of existence which employs their higher faculties" (9). Mill states that "it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, is of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides" (10). This statement does seem elitist: after all, people who enjoy the occasional reality T.V. show or pop culture tabloid story would probably not be happy to be told that they are merely fools whose satisfaction comes from a lack of full information about their options.

Mill has a response for this concern, although this part of his argument

continues to emphasize the superiority of the higher pleasures over the lower pleasures. He says that many people who are capable of appreciating higher pleasures will sometimes forgo them for lower pleasures. He says that “this is quite compatible with a full appreciation of the intrinsic superiority of the lower. Men often, from infirmity of character, make their election for the nearer good, thought they know it to be the less valuable; and this is no less when the choice is between two bodily pleasures than when it is between bodily and mental” (10). Citing insecurity of character for the choice of lower pleasures might create new objections instead of calming all concerns, but the idea that people must have an opportunity to cultivate an appreciation for higher pleasures in order to enjoy them is a more defensible position.

I would like to add a further stipulation to Mill’s view. Even in saying that people sometimes choose lower pleasures over higher pleasures, his argument conforms to a perfectionist view. According to Mill, the higher pleasures are inherently superior and all people, if given sufficient opportunity to experience them, will recognize this fact. I would argue that if the state does not support the liberal arts, then they are essentially giving preference to types of learning and pleasure that tend to be market-driven. Things like pop music and reality T.V. will continue to exist due to the fact that many people enjoy them, and thus there will always be money to be made in presenting such material to the public. However, if there is an insufficient emphasis on the liberal arts, many people will not have the opportunity to appreciate the things that Mill would categorize as higher pleasures. If people have few opportunities to learn about things like art and classical music, they might not seek out things like museums and orchestra concerts as leisure activities, and the existence of these cultural institutions will be jeopardized. Thus, ensuring an emphasis on the liberal arts and peoples’ ability to appreciate certain pursuits does not entail acknowledging their superiority, but rather making sure that they continue to exist as options in society.

There is yet another modern objection that state support for a certain type of education could be construed as undue preference. This is a part of the idea of liberal neutrality argued for by Ronald Dworkin in his work *A Matter of Principle*. Dworkin states that “government must be neutral on what might be called the question of the good life” (191). This theory “supposes that political decisions must be, so far as is possible, independent of any particular conception of the good life, or of what gives value to life. Since the citizens of a society differ in their conceptions, the government does not treat them as equals if it prefers one conception to another” (191). According to this view, a government would seem to violate liberal neutrality if it supported the liberal arts when some citizens in a society might not hold

this as part of their conception of a good life. Following from this, I see two logical directions for the argument to take: either all citizens in a society must unanimously agree that the inherent value of the liberal arts is applicable regardless of what peoples' conception of a good life is (which I think is ideal, but unlikely), or the strict nature of liberal neutrality must be examined.

In fact, there are several existing criticisms of liberal neutrality. Colin Macleod argues that adoption of neutrality might be inconsistent with other important liberal commitments. He states that much of the "state activity that liberals have traditionally endorsed is difficult to reconcile with neutrality. Specifically, it seems difficult to justify government policies and programs which aim at preserving and enriching the artistic and cultural character of communities without appeal to perfectionist considerations of the sort forbidden by neutrality" (530-531). Given the extent to which many modern democracies engage in activities that are inconsistent with liberal neutrality already, I think it would be entirely justified to add the defense of the liberal arts to this category. However, an even more defensible approach would be to provide a different definition for the type of neutrality that states should seek.

Richard Arneson provides one such definition in his work "Liberal Neutrality on the Good: An Autopsy." He states that one possible conception of neutrality is neutrality of justification, which "requires that any policies pursued by the state should be justified independently of any appeal to the supposed superiority of any way of life or conception of the good over others" (193). I will choose to adhere to this definition. Although the appreciation of art and literature might not be a key component in everyone's conception of the good life, I think that the existence of the liberal arts is justified independently of this fact. As I argued earlier, economically-driven entertainment will always have a place in society due to market forces, but if we do not support the liberal arts their existence will be jeopardized. As I will discuss in the following section, viewing the liberal arts in market-based terms can lead to their marginalization. The state must acknowledge the inherent value of the liberal arts in order to secure their place in society and ensure that people have the opportunity to enrich their souls, broaden their view of the world around them, and nurture their own creativity.

Importance of the Inherent Value

In many of the authors I have discussed it is possible to find arguments for the economic good of the humanities and their utility in creating democratic citizens. For example, Nussbaum's argument incorporates the portion of debate around liberal arts education that centers on whether education that is not linked to economic profitability should be

considered necessary. She states that “the national interest of any modern democracy requires a strong economy and a flourishing business culture” and that this economic interest “requires us to draw on the humanities and arts, in order to promote a climate of responsible and watchful stewardship and a culture of creative innovation.” Although I agree with this, I think this argument stops short of the true worth of the liberal arts by assigning them an instrumental value in terms of their good for the economic and political interests of a democracy. Following from this connection, her argument reframes the debate as she states that “we are not forced to choose between a form of education that promotes profit and a form of education that promotes good citizenship” (10-11). Nussbaum states that “science, rightly pursued, is a friend of the humanities rather than their enemy” (7). However, the funding pressures have placed different types of education in direct competition with one another, which sets up a system of winners and losers rather than a coexistence of different types of education. I believe the current economic and political climate make it clear why an inherent view of the value of liberal arts is necessary.

Arguments that focus on education solely as a means to economic growth place the humanities in a fragile position. In “Economic Value of Education and Cognitive Skills, Eric Hanshuk says that, “In the United States, the rapidly increasing earnings of college-educated workers during the past two decades currently provides them with a premium of more than 70% higher earnings than a high school graduate with similar job experience” (40). He goes on to explain that these benefits apply on the national level as well, and that “recent studies suggest that education is important both as an investment in human capital and in facilitating research and development and the diffusion of technologies (see Benhabib & Spiegel, 2005)” (41). If philosophy or English majors are not be seen as facilitating “research and development” or the “diffusion of technologies,” then this view seems to leave little room for their national value.

Politicians often discuss the usefulness of education solely in terms of career preparation and job creation. In my home state of Florida, politicians have recently questioned the merit of using taxpayer dollars to support degrees they view as less than useful. In October, Governor Rick Scott said in an interview to The Herald-Tribune that he wants to shift money away from some degree programs at state universities to increase support for science and technology fields. He explains his reasons for cutting humanities funding as follows: “If I’m going to take money from a citizen to put into education then I’m going to take that money to create jobs. So I want that money to go to degrees where people can get jobs in this state. Is it a vital interest of the state to have more anthropologists? I don’t think so.” This

simple and shortsighted view values education solely in terms of resulting economic gains and places the liberal arts in direct competition with the “STEM” subjects. In the current economic climate, it is even more tempting to discuss education in terms of how it can benefit economic growth, and in this case liberal arts education may seem expendable.

The view espoused by Rick Scott is far from a radical one. In a report by the National Governor’s Association Center for Best Practices, it is stated that if “higher education is truly going to help drive economic growth, students’ academic success must be tied to the needs of the marketplace—not only to ensure that students get jobs, but also to maximize the value of an educated workforce to the economy as a whole” (5). The report says that governors and state policy makers must ask themselves the question: “Are we producing degrees that provide the greatest chance of yielding the most benefit—for individuals, industry, and the state economy?” (5). In an odd turn of language that hints that perhaps the authors do not remember the classic quote from *Animal Farm* that says “all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others,” the report states that “more degrees are important...but some degrees are more valuable than others” (11). It goes on to say that “a degree is better than no degree, but degrees that do not fit the job market and raise the standard of living will not lift the economy” (11). This places higher education firmly in the context of how much utility it can directly produce for the economy.

As David Carr points out, “if the key purpose of the modern university is the higher pursuit of truth then history may have greater claim on curricular programming and resources than technical engineering: but if the key goal is utility, then poetry will fare poorly in any competition with business studies” (8). In the current economic climate, many universities are faced with cuts, and these cuts frequently take place in the areas, namely the liberal arts, that are traditionally seen as not yielding the highest utility. This view fails to acknowledge the values of the liberal arts that transcend economic values, and in an attempt to escape funding pressures in the short term, these actions will have severe consequences in the long term by jeopardizing the place of the liberal arts in higher education.

Recent budget cuts in light of economic difficulties have made it painfully clear that the liberal arts is often viewed as a luxury good that need not be maintained in difficult economic times. Such cuts have occurred at universities in the U.S. and in the U.K. In October 2010, facing funding cuts, the State University of New York at Albany eliminated its French, Classics, Russian, and theater programs. The school’s motto is “the world within reach,” but this hardly seems to be exemplified by placing such subjects out of the reach of its students (Jaschik).

In the recent funding cuts in the U.K., it was announced that the higher education budget would be cut by 40% over 4 years. The Department for Business Innovation and Skills, which oversees higher education, announced that it would ““continue to fund teaching for science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects.” The STEM subjects were identified as priority teaching areas in the Browne Review, and the decision to keep resources focused on these areas essentially signaled an end to most, if not all, teaching grants for humanities (Morgan). As David Carr points out, the changes in higher education funding “have put British universities under some pressure to seek other than public sources of revenue, and to be more financially self-supporting. Such pressure has encouraged them to diversify in more market competitive professional and vocational directions, so that courses of business studies may nowadays appear more economically attractive and viable than courses in ancient history or philosophy” (6).

These education funding cuts have had drastic effects for students, who are now also faced with difficult choices about which type of education they can afford to pursue. The government is allowing universities in England to charge up to £9,000 per year for undergraduate courses, raising the cap from its 2011/12 level of £3,375. (BBC). Although there is a graduated payback system for student loans where students pay back 9% of their income above a threshold (which was raised from £15,000 to £21,000), these increased fees, along with the fact that many universities are being forced to make difficult budgeting decisions that often put the very existence of humanities departments in doubt, will likely affect the number of students who pursue liberal arts degrees. The same situation will arise in the U.S. if public universities continue to defund the humanities: soon degrees like Classical Studies may become accessible only to those students who gain admission to (and have the means to pay for) selective liberal arts colleges or private universities with large endowments.

When a government makes funding decisions based on prioritizing which degrees are more economically necessary or productive, it sends a clear message about the value of the liberal arts. Universities are forced to make difficult funding decisions and may focus more of their resources on majors that are traditionally seen as more “useful.” In turn, the actions of the government and the universities sends the message to students that the value of education lies in how closely it can be connected to future earning potential and overall economic productivity of a country. As seen from the literature discussed earlier, appealing to the idea that the humanities are necessary for democratic citizenship might place them on more solid footing. However, even grounding the need for the study of liberal arts in its utility for creating good democratic citizens falls short of the ideal defense by failing

to establish and defend its inherent value.

Roche acknowledges that “one factor working against the elevation of intrinsic value is the overriding competition principle that rules our age.” He goes on to say that, in the context of his work as Dean at Notre Dame, he took the view that “there are some departments that must be supported even if they do not bring in sufficient numbers of students or dollars. There are some values for which we need to sacrifice our competition principle, for it, too, is after all only a means to greatness, and we must be watchful for victims along the way” (43). By not acknowledging the inherent value of the liberal arts, societies risk the possibility that they might be sacrificed in the competition between universities. After all, schools with tight budgets might come to the conclusion that if their students will obtain sufficient citizenship education at an earlier point in their schooling or by virtue of participating in the democratic process as Rawls suggests, there is no need for them to allocate precious funding to liberal arts disciplines.

Some might question whether it is relevant, given the wide range of ideas on the subject, that a society supports the humanities for one particular reason over another. After all, some might claim that as long as the humanities have a place and support structure in a society, the basis for that recognition need not be examined in great detail. However, the context of the current economic and political climate shows the opposite to be the case. When the humanities are supported for instrumental reasons, such as a justification that they can lead to economic prosperity by fostering a certain type of thinking or that they lead to political stability by creating an informed citizenry, their existence is in fact very fragile. If these instrumental reasons cease to exist and there is no inherent basis for the existence of liberal arts education, then it will be the first area to be marginalized in policy and funding debates.

Place of Liberal Arts

I will argue that current philosophical and political arguments that center on ensuring access to higher education are not sufficient to achieve the goal of giving all citizens access to the inherent benefits of the liberal arts: in order to ensure access to liberal arts education, efforts must begin at the level of early childhood education and continue throughout subsequent stages. Although much of the literature focuses on the place of the liberal arts in higher education, the inherent value of the liberal arts is by no means limited to university students. In fact, it would be extremely harmful to exclude it as a consideration from earlier education. Ensuring the place of the liberal arts in higher education, while undoubtedly critical, is not by itself sufficient. Many people may not pursue higher education, and if the humanities

remain solely the domain of colleges and universities, a large portion of the population will likely not fully benefit from their inherent value. For example, the college-going rate in many American cities, particularly large urban ones, is very low. In Philadelphia, the college-going rate for graduating high school seniors hovers around 25 percent. The U.K. faces a similar issue: according to a 2009 study by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 25% of adults in the U.K. ages 25-34 have not completed upper secondary education (“Education at a Glance”). Thus, ensuring a place for the humanities, but only doing so in the area of higher education, will fail to reach a large portion of the population. High school graduates are no less human than people with doctoral degrees, and no less deserving of the inherent good of the humanities.

Martha Nussbaum acknowledges that grade schools do not play the only role in a child’s development, since much of their character may be shaped by their life within their families. However, she says that schools “can either reinforce or undermine the achievements of the family, good and bad....What they provide, through their curricular content and their pedagogy, can greatly affect the developing child’s mind” (51). For example, one of the things she says a surrounding culture, as partially provided by the school’s education, can do is “teach children to see new immigrant groups, or foreigners, as a faceless mass that threatens their hegemony-or it can teach the perception of the members of these groups as individuals equal to themselves, sharing common rights and responsibilities” (51). Although this is something that certainly has value for a democratic society, it also has inherent value by virtue of broadening children’s view of the world and reinforcing their recognition of a common humanity. Supporting this inherent value, even in grade school education, is critical to ensuring that the benefits of a liberal arts education are not solely limited to college students.

Advocating for a commitment to liberal arts education in grade school may seem like a stringent requirement. However, given the fact that the benefits of a liberal arts education are relevant even at a young age and some students may not otherwise have access to the humanities, it is necessary. In the era of No Child Left Behind, with its focus on continual improvement of standardized test results, discussing grade school education in terms of inherent goods may seem to imagine an improbable scenario. As Roche would say, I am imagining the world not as it is, but as how I believe it should be. This is a rigorous approach to the place of the humanities in society, but given the inherent good of a liberal arts education, it is not an unreasonable one.

The inherent benefits of the liberal arts for the soul, our view of the world, and innate creativity apply regardless of age. I believe that the

decision to prioritize a liberal arts education will provide these inherent benefits during grade school education, and because of this a society should also maintain a commitment to the inherent value of liberal arts for students before they reach university. As mentioned from Nussbaum's argument earlier, this inclusion does not have to be at the expense of science education or other disciplines. Nor does it have to come at the expense of results on standardized tests: while it is debatable whether or not allowing children to holistically engage with material will lead to results as rapidly as intensive drilling in testing techniques, it can be argued that it will support their long-term educational development in a way that will both improve their performance at skills the tests aim to measure while allowing them the inherent value that an instrumental education strips away.

If people have benefited from a liberal arts education since a very young age, they will be able to engage with the world around them on a deeper level. They will be able to appreciate works of art, pieces of music, and literary texts. By doing so, this will create a climate that appreciates and supports these pursuits. In turn, the adults that continue to see the world "not as it is but as it should be" will recognize the inherent value of liberal arts and ensure its place for future generations. Much like the prisoners from Socrates' allegory of the cave, adults with liberal arts educations should not confine themselves solely to a cerebral existence but should work to ensure that others have access to humanities education from an early age.

Conclusion

The liberal arts face many threats in the current economic and political climate. Funding cuts at the university level have made these threats clearer than ever. Although the liberal arts can be argued for in terms of their value for creating a strong national economy or fostering characteristics necessary for good democratic citizens, I believe they also have an inherent value that must be acknowledged. This inherent value lies in their benefit to our souls, the way we view the world, and our innate creativity. Rather than being a paternalistic view that violates liberal neutrality, I believe this argument is defensible from an egalitarian point of view by virtue of the fact that it allows for the existence of more options in society. The inherent benefit of the liberal arts should be recognized and supported by the state at all educational stages. The current economic and political climate has made it clear that any less stringent support can jeopardize the permanent place of the liberal arts in society. If we deny the liberal arts this honor, we are denying a part of what makes us human.

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