

Don't Dismiss the Humanities

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What use could the humanities be in a digital age?

University students focusing on the humanities may end up, at least in their parents' nightmares, as dog-walkers for those majoring in computer science. But, for me, the humanities are not only relevant but also give us a toolbox to think seriously about ourselves and the world.

I wouldn't want everybody to be an art or literature major, but the world would be poorer — figuratively, anyway — if we were all coding software or running companies. We also want musicians to awaken our souls, writers to lead us into fictional lands, and philosophers to help us exercise our minds and engage the world.

Skeptics may see philosophy as the most irrelevant and self-indulgent of the humanities, but the way I understand the world is shaped by three philosophers in particular.

First, Sir Isaiah Berlin described the world as muddled and complex, with many competing values yet no simple yardstick to determine which should trump the others. We yearn for One True Answer, but it's our lot to struggle to reconcile inconsistent goals. He referred to this as pluralism of values.

Yet Sir Isaiah also cautioned against the hand-wringing that sometimes paralyzes intellectuals, the idea that everything is so complex, nuanced and uncertain that one cannot act. It's the idea pilloried by Yeats: "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity."

Sir Isaiah argued for acknowledging doubts and uncertainty — and then forging ahead. "Principles are not less sacred because their duration cannot be guaranteed," he wrote. "Indeed, the very desire for guarantees that our values are eternal and secure in some objective heaven is perhaps only a craving for

the certainties of childhood.”

Second, John Rawls offers a useful way of thinking about today’s issues such as inequality or poverty, of institutionalizing what our society gravely lacks: empathy. He explores basic questions of fairness, leading to a compelling explanation for why we should create safety nets to support the poor and good schools to help their kids achieve a better life.

Rawls suggests imagining that we all gather to agree on a social contract, but from an “original position” so that we don’t know if we will be rich or poor, smart or dumb, diligent or lazy, American or Bangladeshi. If we don’t know whether we’ll be born in a wealthy suburban family or to a single mom in an inner city, we’ll be more inclined to favor measures that protect those at the bottom.

Or, in the context of today’s news, we may be less likely to deport Honduran children back to the desolate conditions from which they have fled.

We still will allow for inequality to create incentives for economic growth, but Rawls suggests that, from an original position, we will choose structures that allow inequality only when the least advantaged members of society also benefit.

Third, Peter Singer of Princeton University has pioneered the public discussion of our moral obligations to animals, including those we raise to eat. Singer wrote a landmark book in 1975, “Animal Liberation,” and cites utilitarian reasoning to argue that it’s wrong to inflict cruelty on cows, hogs or chickens just so that we can enjoy a tasty lunch.

It has long been recognized that we have some ethical obligations that transcend our species; that’s why we’re arrested if we torture kittens or organize dog fights. But Singer focused squarely on industrial agriculture and the thrice-daily question of what we put on our plates, turning that into not just a gastronomical issue but also a moral one.

I’m not a vegetarian, although I’m sometimes tempted, but Singer’s arguments still apply. Do we skip regular eggs or pay more for cage-free? Should I eat goose liver pâté (achieved by torturing geese)? Do we give preference to restaurants that try to source pork or chicken in ways that inflict less pain?

So let me push back at the idea that the humanities are obscure, arcane and irrelevant. These three philosophers influence the way I think about politics, immigration, inequality; they even affect what I eat.

It's also worth pointing out that these three philosophers are recent ones. To adapt to a changing world, we need new software for our cellphones; we also need new ideas. The same goes for literature, for architecture, languages and theology.

Our world is enriched when coders and marketers dazzle us with smartphones and tablets, but, by themselves, they are just slabs. It is the music, essays, entertainment and provocations that they access, spawned by the humanities, that animate them — and us.

So, yes, the humanities are still relevant in the 21st century — every bit as relevant as an iPhone.

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