

Identity Fetishism

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Marx wrote incisively about commodity fetishism—the tendency of people to see only the results of production (commodities), ignoring the hours of human labor that actually created them. The humanities seems to suffer from something of the reverse problem: a tendency to be absorbed by the names of big people and not seeing beyond to the ideas they espouse.

The most extreme example is Leo Strauss, who encouraged his students to put aside their prejudices and fully immerse themselves in the worlds and minds of the greats. The greats were so great, Strauss suggested, that if you disagree with them, you probably just don't understand them well enough.

But even other teachers of philosophy have the same problem, presenting the views of X and Y even when X is pretty clearly wrong. Despite its absurdities, students must learn to understand X's view. This seems fairly universal; even books like *What is the Meaning of it All?*, which explains philosophy without the names or complex terminology, still presents clearly bogus ideas on the same footing as more reasonable ones.

In other fields, this pattern is less frequent, but still there for whole courses of research. In sociology, papers must cite long-dead patron theorists to lend their empirical research an air of legitimacy by presenting it as a member of a recognized family. Even more recent works, like Annette Lareau's brilliant *Unequal Childhoods*, are at pains to show how they adhere to a theoretical model (the recently-alive Bourdieu in that case). In most other fields, the theorists take pains to make sure their work is consistent with the evidence, not the other way around.

Even in most humanities classes, the course content consists of a series of papers making arguments. The goal of the class is to understand the view of the authors and determine (in the best ones) to what extent you agree or disagree.

This isn't particularly unreasonable, but is a far cry from life in the hard sciences, where usually there is an actual consensus on some subject and otherwise there are a couple of named theories, each being developed by a group of people.

Why the difference? First, is it perhaps hard science that's in the wrong? I don't think so. The goal of science is to discover the truth about the world. Truths remain true no matter who says them and it's unlikely that one person will discover the whole truth. Thus the pattern of letting multiple people develop a theory and try to find evidence for it to convince the others.

So why don't the softer sciences follow the same model? The problem gets worse the softer you get, which suggests the problem lies in the softness itself. The problem is that without identities, one has to judge the ideas themselves which, in a soft science is somewhat difficult to do.

It's easy in science to run an experiment and see if it proves a theory true or false, it's much harder to get consensus about a reasonable theory of morality in philosophy. But it is easy to pick out the famous in academy culture and assign their stuff.

Identity fetishism thrives in a world afraid to make its own judgments. It exalts the thinkers of the past and, in doing so, diminishes its own capacities. But science must march forward instead of backward and that requires the daring to distinguish true from false.