

## What is the good of your discipline? Callum Ward

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Every philosophy student has, at one time or another, had to defend themselves against the accusatory question: 'Why philosophy?'. The charge often runs that philosophy's (and many of the humanities') product is intangible and of little benefit in the 'real world'; that three years or more of such naval-gazing is unlikely to help job prospects or gain that all-important foot on the property-ladder. The implication of which is that we should take an instrumentalist approach wherein education is a means to a tangible end for society, the individual concerned, or both. These criticisms do not just lead to discomfort at parties and family gatherings: as university budgets suffer under government austerity, they pass the brunt onto the less lucrative and apparently less useful humanities departments who are increasingly underfunded and in many institutions threatened with closure. Thus the critique forms the basis of decisions that will shape the nature of society and threaten the health of the disciplines. In view of this, this essay attempts to mount a defence of the humanities, particularly philosophy, using an argument at least as old as Plato - that for the good of society we must have vibrant philosophy.

The critique itself is hardly new; Russell addressed these concerns a century ago, countering that this intangibility is philosophy's very virtue as the student of philosophy embraces the doubts it engenders in the spirit of speculation and enquiry which ultimately nurtures the growth of the Self<sup>1</sup>. This typifies the first basic argument in favour of philosophy and the wider humanities: it is personally enriching and thus worthwhile for its own sake. For the second basic type we may turn to Russell's tutor Mill and his inaugural address at Saint Andrew's University where he argues that breadth of education enriches not only the life of the student but the society as a whole, particularly democratic society, by enriching its citizenry to be reflective and sensible. Refinements of this argument within the modern context tend to focus on the specific properties of the humanities that make good citizens but all tend to agree with Mill's assertion that "Men are men before they are lawyers, or physicians, or merchants... if you make them capable and sensible men, they will make themselves capable and sensible lawyers or physicians."<sup>3</sup> Thus, for Mill, society benefits by having people who are sensible<sup>2</sup> to and curious about the world outside of their own narrow speciality.

There is clearly great overlap between the two defences of the humanities as both rely on the effect it has on the student: in the first the enhancement of her life and in the second the properties this enhancement confers which in turn enhance society. This first justification may then be said to fit most comfortably into a Kantian ethical framework in which the individual is the end in itself. The second point may fit into a non-consequentialist framework such as that of Rawls' Theory of Justice but is also consequentialist in that it is justified in terms of the 'greater good'. There are those content with the first justification such as Fish who states that: "The humanities are their own good... there is nothing more to say..."<sup>4</sup>, but the temptation to state their innate and integral value with no further justification is hazardous: not only does it do little to assuage the consequentialist doubts outlined at the start of the essay but it also ignores the relationship between the humanities and other spheres of life.

Furthermore, it could be argued that while the humanities are valuable in themselves there is still no need for such large public expenditure or even that they be a core part of any curriculum. One may pursue one's self enrichment in one's spare-time; one may accept that the humanities is an important component of democracy but advocate cheaper options of engaging the public with it, perhaps through the media and secondary school curriculum, perhaps through cut-price or free distance learning courses. It is notable that only teaching, not research in the subject, is justified by either argument; perhaps this is where the budget can be slashed and society still benefit from the humanities.

In economics there is a general consensus around the concept of public goods, an acceptance that there are some goods which are of general benefit to all but would be too unprofitable or unsuitable for private companies to develop and/or maintain and thus are the responsibility of government investment; these include a country's infrastructure, street lamps, police force, etc. If it is true that the study of the humanities is of benefit to society as a whole and its loss detrimental to our political life then it would seem to follow that the humanities closely parallel this, they are, if not a public good which tend to encompass only the economic health of a nation, then a political good affecting the health of a nation's political life. This is true not only of democracies - where the humanities make an important contribution to the aim of a well-educated and sensitive citizenry - but to any society where public debate and thought is allowed, even when they are not able to translate that into political channels.

As Mill argues in 'On Liberty' it is to the detriment of any society to censor ideas and debate for doing so "...is robbing the human race; posterity as well as existing generations; those who dissent from the opinion still more than those who hold it."<sup>5</sup>. Yet this surely has positive connotations too, that the more opinions we can produce and the more debate we can procure the better for the state of human knowledge as we go through the Hegelian process of thesis, antitheses, synthesis. When the matter in hand is political it is to the detriment of all to reduce the ability of the antithesis and thus the eventual synthesis; this is not to say that only the political philosophers and political scientists should be protected: all knowledge - certainly all philosophy - is political on some level as different understandings of the individual and her interactions with her environment entail different systems of political thought.

This need for antagonism; of clashing values and thought systems to advance human progress, is best sated by the academic system. For it is the radicals who, correct or not, embody the antithesis which Mill argues that prevailing thought benefits from testing itself against; it allows talented people who could be gainfully employed elsewhere to devote themselves to developing and in many cases actively trying to take steps towards, their social and personal conception of the good. It is thus the very academic bubble so often derided that is a crucial part of society's engine of antithetical thought: should these men and women be forced to work in the 'real-world' it is likely that they would be forced to rationalise and compromise with its values or that they simply would never be able to devote the time and energy needed to develop their thought. Thus this essay argues that state subsidised dissidents are necessary for the development of society. Doubtless without this we would still have great radical thinkers and have in the past; however they are greatly hampered when they do not have the nurturing environment of academia: how much of Robert Burns' poetry was hindered by his inability to write against the Empire due to his work for the government? How much of Gramsci's incisive thought would we have gained had he been able to devote his days to open thought and debate rather than spending them in a prison hospital? Of Marx had he been gainfully employed rather than living destitute in London?

Paying people to think about how we should and do live can thus be characterised as a political good in the same sense of the economists' public good. It is not sufficient to merely lift censorship, in that case only the extremely devoted will continue to pursue the debate in the face of poverty and society will miss out on many hues of thought, weakening the debate/dialectic process. However this does lead us back to the question of values; the consequentialist in the critique of philosophy is a specific type of consequentialist: one for whom profit and material gain are the tantamount aims. As Slouka argues, this value set has subsumed the others and become the dominant value set in the public discourse and for policy-makers: in today's discourse when we talk of failing education systems we talk not of civic but only economic crises.<sup>6</sup>

The contradiction regarding the humanities' importance to democracy is that even as the subjects are threatened,

democratic structures themselves are unlikely to lend much support. The acceptance of dominant materialist values amongst the public means that they are unlikely to support the humanities particularly, and with budgets being slashed they are likely to favour the retention of more tangible public services. Yet the humanities are crucial to society and democracy, it would not be sufficient to leave them only to those who could pay: one would have a class division of those technically trained with little nurtured inclination to question or look at wider society while degrees in the humanities and the personal enrichment entailed would become marks of elitism<sup>7</sup>. In Rawls' conception of liberal pluralism he argues that governments may advocate a conception of the good and attempt to persuade citizens to follow that conception: indeed, this already occurs in a more ad hoc fashion in modern society. Thus, if the government accepted the humanities as a political good then it could be justified in advocating the humanities to its citizens and so would perhaps not be moved to take disproportionate funding from humanities' budgets.

However, governments today do not hold this view; it is not the case that governments and the public hold the humanities to be of no value - simply that they are of less value than other disciplines. The dominant concern behind this tends to be in relation to external economic competitors and resulting job losses as the economy competes less well, particularly with regard to Asia catching up with the West<sup>8</sup>. Thus the humanities finds itself at a considerable disadvantage in seeming valuable in the minds of the policy-maker or public; for although the humanities offer much in terms of human knowledge and much in terms of stimulating debate for the health of the society in question; it offers very little in terms of competitive advantage. In contrast science and technology are not only tangibly useful but they also confer an advantage which the nation-state can use to its own ends in a zero-sum fashion. The nation-state system of socio-economic and cultural units competing for economic and military pre-eminence thus reduces the value of philosophy in the eyes of partisan public and governments because its gains are immeasurable and impossible to hoard.

In conclusion, philosophy is not only valuable for qualitative enrichment of the self as Russell outlined, or for creating a democratically fertile citizenry as Mill argues, but is also crucial to any progressive society as an engine of the output of radical thought against which the dominant paradigms are tested and modified. The outlook for the humanities is grave particularly as underpinning much of its funding cuts is a governmental and public conception of the good which is almost purely economic in nature. Frankly, one cannot answer the critique outlined against the value of philosophy without challenging the underlying value assumptions or giving up on the humanities altogether. Yet it seems reprehensible that such a mercantile conception of the good should prevail so thoroughly with little regard for the civic, emotional or spiritual good. It would be of great interest for society to consider and challenge the dominant value system in order to achieve one more relevant and useful, and for that - well; you will need philosophy.

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## Endnotes

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  - This idea is not mine but I was unable to recall the original source
  - Randel (2009)
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