

## Why We Need the Humanities

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We need the humanities because no one really knows what the word “beauty” means. We recognize beauty when we see it, or hear it. But what *is* it? This is a very tough question. When Louis Armstrong, who was so great at jazz, was asked “What’s so great about jazz?”, he is said to have answered, “If you need to ask, you’ll never know.” The same could be said, of course, of Mozart, of Edith Piaf, of *gagaku*, of the mridangam. Also of Tang poetry, of the Mona Lisa, the Taj Mahal. The question “What is beauty?” may have no answer. But there is interest—indeed there is beauty—in asking it.

We need the humanities because, for some odd reason, we were born with a moral sense. When a shark eats a mackerel, it does not ask, “Should I eat the mackerel?” It eats the mackerel, and the word “should” does not arise. As humans we by no means always do what we should, but the word does make sense. For us, judgments about “what is” and “what ought to be” are different kinds of judgments. They exist on parallel planes, neither reducible to the other. Science and social science study “what is”; the humanities does, too, but it also wrestles with “ought”.

We need the humanities because human beings are the only animals that laugh. Do chimpanzees laugh? Hyenas do not; we only say that they do. Anatomists can tell us how the lungs and the trachea contract during the laughter response, and psychologists can analyze the mental structures that induce those responses; but the people who put the life into laughter are the humanists, even if they have no idea how it works. E.B. White may have put this point best. “Humor,” White wrote, “is like a frog. You can dissect it, yes, but the thing dies in the process, and the innards are interesting only to specialists.” White was a fine writer, an astute humanist.

We need the humanities in order to understand why we need the wilderness. The sciences can tell us how to preserve the wilderness, and the social sciences can tell us how to mobilize the political opinion that is necessary to support the preservation. But only the humanities can tell us why we need the wilderness in the first place. Why are we somehow better—richer—when we stand before a magnificent mountain, in silence, in awe? And are we not better off, even in the bustle of our daily lives, knowing that the wilderness, even if temporarily out of sight, *is still there*? Just imagine this: what if, as we waited for the left turn arrow at Third and Main during rush hour, we had to think of ourselves as inhabiting a world that contained nothing but things like Third and Main at rush hour? No wilderness—anywhere. Such a world be something less, of course, than the world that we have; but *we*, inside, would also be something less.

We need the humanities because languages are not codes and translation between them is not code-switching. This is because words are not labels that match up with things, one on one, as most people suppose them to be. Words are things in themselves, things that we pass back and forth in order to get through the living of life, much as we pass around hammers, cooking

pots, coins, or cabbages. The ordinary person may not realize this about language. But philosophers know it; linguists analyze it; poets live it.

We need the humanities because human beings die. We are not the only animals who die, but are probably the only ones who think about death in advance. Emily Dickinson, another fine humanist, once observed that “to be alive is so absorbing that we hardly have time for anything else.” Logically speaking, Dickinson’s statement is a tautology, and tautologies, the logicians tell us, are empty statements. But this one somehow is not empty. What does the poet mean by it? Is she gently reminding us that someday life will no longer soak up all of our time? Because death will? And how much time would that be? A long time. A *very* long time. Endless time? The thought can be frightening. What should we think about death? What should we *do* about it? How does the shadow of death affect the way we live life? Religions offer some answers to these questions. The study of religions offers thoughts about the answers.

We need the humanities because, if anything can outweigh death, it is love. Are you interested? How can *anything* outweigh death? Where should we look for such a thing? Mathematics can be elegant; science beautiful; sociology informative; engineering efficient. But these aren’t the places to go in search of love. Where have people gone to understand love? To celebrate it? Around the world, and from ancient times, people have turned to: poems, songs, stories, paintings, sculpture—in short, the humanities. Try it! It can work for you, too.

We need the humanities because human beings have memories. Memory is our primary access to the past, yet it is notoriously unreliable. In two ways, it fades: individual memory impressions fade with time, and the power of memory in general fades as we age. To make things worse, memory can distort. We sometimes remember things not as they were but as we would have wished them to be. Nostalgia can make the past gleam. I remember sunny days catching bluegills as a boy; I do not remember getting fishhooks stuck in my finger. Mark Twain observed that *his* memory actually *gained* power with age, until, in his senior years, why, he could remember things that didn’t even happen. This is one reason why we need historians, who are another kind of humanist, to help us figure out the past. Historians rely on human memory, to be sure, but also on other kinds of evidence—documents, monuments, relics, paintings, photographs—and, sorting and sifting evidence rather as a detective does, historians try to piece together a picture of what happened.

And why do we need that picture? Is the past a kind of mirror, that can help us to see ourselves better and to improve, as the great Chinese historian Sima Guang believed when he penned his “Comprehensive Mirror to Aid Government”? Does history contain learnable lessons, as George Santayana apparently believed when he said those who remain ignorant of the past “are condemned to repeat it”? Maybe. Why should we second-guess minds of the caliber of Sima’s or Santayana’s? But even if knowing human history had no practical value, isn’t it important that we know it anyway? Isn’t this in a way parallel to knowing that the wilderness is still there? Are we not somehow better—richer—when we understand history? At a minimum, isn’t it just more fun?

We need the humanities because, just as things gleam in the past, so they can gleam in the future, too. We get joy from anticipating and imagining. Have you ever noticed that anticipating Christmas, or a day at the zoo with children, or a visit from Aunt Hilda, is

sometimes more fun than actually living through these events? Here anticipation and fiction have something in common. In both cases we get to live in imagined scenes that, just because they are not complicated by all of the warts and pebbles of actuality, are somehow cleaner, purer, more powerful, more moving—in any case more *something*. This is why ghost stories, told orally, can be more frightening than picture books, and why radio fiction is sometimes more vivid than television.

We need the humanities because it is hard to get to the bottom of the question “Who am I?” My roles can be listed, of course: I am a husband, a father, a teacher, a tennis player, an American, a fan of anyone who will beat the Yankees, and a UCR professor whose grocery bill gets paid because society has decided to value something that it calls “the humanities.” But none of these labels, somehow, gets us to the bottom of things. The question still stares: Who *am* I, after all the labels are peeled off? Anything? Nothing? It *feels* as if something is there. What *is* that? What can we call it? The self? Consciousness?

We need the humanities because we can imagine that nothing exists *except* my consciousness. Everything else might be nothing but the sense data that compose it. This view is called solipsism. Solipsism actually makes perfect sense, logically speaking, but most of us don’t accept it just because it seems so weird. We *want* to believe that an outside world exists, independently of our sense data. But watch out. As soon as you take that step, Cartesian dualism, and the mind-body problem, fall into your lap. Now *there’s* a truly tough problem. If you think the humanities are all touchy-feely and squishy-wishy, watch out for the mind-body problem. It’s like an optical illusion in blue steel.

We need the humanities because, if we decide not to be solipsists, then we have to face the fact that there are many other people in the world and that it’s not going to be easy to get to know all of them. Even our next-door neighbor can be a mystery. What to do? *Read*. Good novels can bring us inside other people’s lives, even as we stay at home, recumbent in our favorite chairs. Stories can bring us across oceans, across cultures, and out of limitations that we didn’t even know we had. Learning about other cultures helps us to understand not only those other cultures, but our own as well. One of the best ways to learn about one’s own culture is to realize that stuff one has always taken for granted, when viewed from another angle, ain’t necessarily so.

And finally, we need the humanities because humanity itself is something that we all share. Not all of us are electricians. Physicians. Opticians. Beauticians. Obstetricians. Morticians. Statisticians. Nor need we be. We can parcel out these jobs, some doing some, some others, training for them as specialists. But we can’t divvy up being human, and that makes all of the humanities our common ground. Who among us does not use language, have a moral sense, laugh, or know beauty when we see it? Which one of us is not going to die, or does not need love? These are all things that we share. We *have* to share them. They cannot be delegated. And that means that there’s something very special about being able to meet someone--anyone, anywhere--look the person in the eye and say, “Hey, sister! Hey, brother! We share the humanities, and how are *you*, today?”