

## STANLEY FISH

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**QUESTION:** What is the significance of Fish' argument for OCB's claim to be "educating students to be highly principled global business leaders"?

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### WILL THE HUMANITIES SAVE US? STANLEY FISH<sup>1</sup>

In the final paragraph of my last column, I observed that the report of the New York State Commission on Higher Education slights—indeed barely mentions—the arts and humanities, despite the wide-ranging scope of its proposals. Those who posted comments agreed with David Small that “the arts and the humanities are always the last to receive any assistance.”

There were, however, different explanations of this unhappy fact. Sean Pidgeon put the blame on “humanities departments who are responsible for the leftist politics that still turn people off.” Kedar Kulkarni blamed “the absence of a culture that privileges Learning to improve oneself as a human being.” Bethany blamed universities, which because they are obsessed with “maintaining funding” default on the obligation to produce “well rounded citizens.” Matthew blamed no one, because in his view the report's priorities are just what they should be: “When a poet creates a vaccine or a tangible good that can be produced by a Fortune 500 company, I'll rescind my comment.”

Although none of these commentators uses the word, the issue they implicitly raise is justification. How does one justify funding the arts and humanities? It is clear which justifications are not available. You can't argue that the arts and humanities are able to support themselves through grants and private donations. You can't argue that a state's economy will benefit by a new reading of “Hamlet.” You can't argue—well you can, but it won't fly—that a graduate who is well-versed in the history of Byzantine art will be attractive to employers (unless the employer is a museum). You can talk as Bethany does about “well rounded citizens,” but that ideal belongs to an earlier period, when the ability to refer knowledgeably to Shakespeare or Gibbon or the Thirty Years War had some cash value (the sociologists call it cultural capital). Nowadays, larding your conversations with small bits of erudition is more likely to irritate than to win friends and influence people.

At one time justification of the arts and humanities was unnecessary because, as Anthony Kronman puts it in a new book, “Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life,” it was assumed that “a college was above all a place for the

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Fish in New York Times Blog “Think Again”, January 6, 2008  
<http://fish.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/01/06/will-the-humanities-save-us/>

training of character, for the nurturing of those intellectual and moral habits that together form the basis for living the best life one can.” It followed that the realization of this goal required an immersion in the great texts of literature, philosophy and history even to the extent of memorizing them, for “to acquire a text by memory is to fix in one’s mind the image and example of the author and his subject.”

It is to a version of this old ideal that Kronman would have us return, not because of a professional investment in the humanities (he is a professor of law and a former dean of the Yale Law School), but because he believes that only the humanities can address “the crisis of spirit we now confront” and “restore the wonder which those who have glimpsed the human condition have always felt, and which our scientific civilization, with its gadgets and discoveries, obscures.”

As this last quotation makes clear, Kronman is not so much mounting a defense of the humanities as he is mounting an attack on everything else. Other spokespersons for the humanities argue for their utility by connecting them (in largely unconvincing ways) to the goals of science, technology and the building of careers. Kronman, however, identifies science, technology and careerism as impediments to living a life with meaning. The real enemies, he declares, are “the careerism that distracts from life as a whole” and “the blind acceptance of science and technology that disguise and deny our human condition.” These false idols, he says, block the way to understanding. We must turn to the humanities if we are to “meet the need for meaning in an age of vast but pointless powers,” for only the humanities can help us recover the urgency of “the question of what living is for.”

The humanities do this, Kronman explains, by exposing students to “a range of texts that express with matchless power a number of competing answers to this question.” In the course of this program—Kronman calls it “secular humanism”—students will be moved “to consider which alternatives lie closest to their own evolving sense of self.” As they survey “the different ways of living that have been held up by different authors,” they will be encouraged “to enter as deeply as they can into the experiences, ideas, and values that give each its permanent appeal.” And not only would such a “revitalized humanism” contribute to the growth of the self, it “would put the conventional pieties of our moral and political world in question” and “bring what is hidden into the open—the highest goal of the humanities and the first responsibility of every teacher.”

Here then is a justification of the humanities that is neither strained (reading poetry contributes to the state’s bottom line) nor crassly careerist. It is a stirring vision that promises the highest reward to those who respond to it. Entering into a conversation with the great authors of the western tradition holds out the prospect of experiencing “a kind of immortality” and achieving “a position immune to the corrupting powers of time.”

Sounds great, but I have my doubts. Does it really work that way? Do the humanities ennoble? And for that matter, is it the business of the humanities, or of any other area of academic study, to save us?

The answer in both cases, I think, is no. The premise of secular humanism (or of just old-fashioned humanism) is that the examples of action and thought portrayed in the enduring works of literature, philosophy and history can create in readers the desire to emulate them. Philip Sydney put it as well as anyone ever has when he asks (in “The Defense of Poesy,” 1595), “Who reads Aeneas carrying old Anchises on his back that wishes not it was his fortune to perform such an excellent act?” Thrill to this picture of filial piety in the Aeneid and you will yourself

become devoted to your father. Admire the selfless act with which Sidney Carton ends his life in “A Tale of Two Cities” and you will be moved to prefer the happiness of others to your own. Watch with horror what happens to Faust and you will be less likely to sell your soul. Understand Kant’s categorical imperative and you will not impose restrictions on others that you would resist if they were imposed on you.

It’s a pretty idea, but there is no evidence to support it and a lot of evidence against it. If it were true, the most generous, patient, good-hearted and honest people on earth would be the members of literature and philosophy departments, who spend every waking hour with great books and great thoughts, and as someone who’s been there (for 45 years) I can tell you it just isn’t so. Teachers and students of literature and philosophy don’t learn how to be good and wise; they learn how to analyze literary effects and to distinguish between different accounts of the foundations of knowledge. The texts Kronman recommends are, as he says, concerned with the meaning of life; those who study them, however, come away not with a life made newly meaningful, but with a disciplinary knowledge newly enlarged.

And that, I believe, is how it should be. Teachers of literature and philosophy are competent in a subject, not in a ministry. It is not the business of the humanities to save us, no more than it is their business to bring revenue to a state or a university. What then do they do? They don’t do anything, if by “do” is meant bring about effects in the world. And if they don’t bring about effects in the world they cannot be justified except in relation to the pleasure they give to those who enjoy them.

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. There is nothing more to say, and anything that is said—even when it takes the form of Kronman’s inspiring cadences—diminishes the object of its supposed praise.