



Opinion: We glorify modern science, but the humanities still matter

BY ERIC TWEEL, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE JULY 28, 2014

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Photograph by: Jessica Hill, AP

MONTREAL — Every humanities student today has come across the question of “what do you plan to do with your degree?” Founded on confident skepticism and motivated by genuine concern, this question and the familiar interrogation that surrounds it haunt those engaged in the humanities, demanding a reaction and in some cases a well-formulated response. Despite the intensity of this struggle, nothing clear on either side has emerged, and the proper conclusion — that the humanities are necessary to a healthy and worthwhile human experience — has not been demonstrated.

The debate on the legitimacy of the humanities as an intellectual pursuit is, in a simple sense, nothing new. One has always needed reasons for doing things. Yet the humanities have never been so far on the defensive, in large part because of today's predominant assumptions. Anyone who goes to university so that they can satisfy their society is making a tragic mistake. Institutions of higher learning are at their greatest not when they shape students to fit within the existing framework, but when they create people who can change it for the better. It is for this purpose that the humanities are most crucial.

The data on the career success of university graduates gives no clear indication that the humanities are less useful in a vocational sense, and humanities majors tend to be just as numerous as science majors among top earners. As well, the dynamic nature of contemporary life means that any prediction about future job prospects is little more than a crapshoot. As corporate consultants Christian Madsbjerg and Mikkel Rasmussen have noted: "A generation ago, lawyers made more money than investment bankers. Today, we have too many law graduates ... and the investment banks complain about a lack of talent."

It is noteworthy that the critics of the humanities are the loudest in the United States, where a university education is far more expensive than in Canada or Europe. Given the incredible cost for higher learning in the U.S., it has been easy for American polemicists to mischaracterize liberal-arts educations as luxury goods for self-centred elites who either don't need a serious job or will get one regardless of what they study. Yet the knowledge acquired from a liberal-arts education is in a concrete sense the opposite of a luxury. It is a political necessity. Democracy requires all citizens to understand the underpinnings of governmental decisions, so that they can vote in a well-informed and effective way.

In contrast to the praises sung daily for the wonders of modern science, there is little positive being said about the humanities. Stephen Hawking has declared that "philosophy is dead." Philip Roth claimed in 2009 that it is "optimistic" to think anybody will be reading novels in 25 years. And the headline of a widely read 2003 Newsweek article ran: "Poetry is dead. Does anybody really care?"

The mistake here is to confuse a school or group within a discipline with the discipline itself, the latter of which will evolve rather than die out. If the humanities are broken, all the more reason to fix them.

Despite all the criticism they receive, the humanities continue to thrive in higher education and general society. That is how things ought to be. In many ways, the mountain of history on which contemporary life rests is built from the humanities, and anyone who doesn't appreciate this fails to understand what the humanities are. Admiring the view from its peak, one might not see the mountain upon which one is standing, but this does not mean that it doesn't exist.

This was the winning entry in McGill University's internal Humanities Matter! essay contest last spring. Essays were judged by a panel of McGill professors; the contest was open to all students.

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