

The Role of the Humanities⁺

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In this session we shall discuss the different kinds of justification given for funding Humanities research: e.g. intrinsic value, informing social policy, understanding cultural heritage, promoting economic value, contributing to other academic disciplines, informing undergraduate education and promoting innovation. In the interactive part of this session we shall try to discover which kinds of justification are favoured in the countries represented by the participants.

In my presentation for this session I shall discuss attempts to articulate the value of the Humanities. For the sake of clarity, I shall distinguish the most common justifications into five categories:

1. Intrinsic value
2. Societal influence and policy making

3. Cultural heritage
4. Economic value
5. Educational value

There is, of course, a large literature on the role of the Humanities: national reports, opinion pieces in the media, books (scholarly and popular) as well as articles in edited books. I have been guided by this literature in drawing up the basic classification of justifications. But what will be distinctive about my presentation is that I shall draw upon the interviews that we have been conducting as part of the Humanities World Report project (HWR): see <http://humanitiesworldreport.net/>. In our work, we have selected around 80 scholars worldwide for interviews, posing questions over a wide range of topics (e.g. about funding, inter-disciplinary research, the digital

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Humanities, the effects of university ranking systems on research). One of our questions concerns the justification of the Humanities, and in it we ask how our respondents themselves defend the value of Humanities research, especially when faced with a hostile audience. So, in my presentation, I shall draw on the answers to this particular question.

Using these different sources, I shall proceed to discuss the different justifications for the Humanities listed above. In the rest of this abstract I give an outline sketch of each.

1. Intrinsic value

Any academic discipline can be defended on the grounds of intrinsic interest: the value of the research lies (in part) in the very knowledge or understanding gained (i.e. not merely in any further social or economic goals it may happen to promote). In the case of the Humanities, the intrinsic value argument is particularly strong: as human beings we ought to have an interest in our history, culture, ideas etc. One point I shall make is that this type of justification is proving to be quite popular with those whom we have interviewed so far as part of the HWR project.

I shall also discuss what I call a "hybrid" justification, which combines instrumental and intrinsic elements (though it is ultimately instrumental in character). When defending the economic value of any discipline, for instance, it is often argued that we cannot know in advance what research will prove the most useful. So the best course is to allow intellectual curiosity to run its course, and let the economic value fall out serendipitously. If one confines oneself only to what seems lucrative or socially useful, one will probably miss out on the most fruitful avenues of research. So—the argument runs—it is best to embark on one's research with a non-instrumentalist mindset, and to proceed as if one is pursuing it for its intrinsic value. However, this is still an instrumentalist

approach: the ultimate justification is some non-intrinsic value; but psychologically it embraces the intrinsic approach.

2. Societal influence and policy making

In this part of my talk I shall describe justifications that point to the value of Humanities research in informing social policy, and policy making more generally. To analyse these kinds of justifications, one can either proceed by discipline (history or linguistics), or by the area of social policy concerned (e.g. security or environment). Here, I give a few examples from my own discipline, philosophy.

3. Cultural heritage

Under this heading I shall examine a cluster of closely related roles for Humanities research, all centering around the notions of culture and heritage. These roles include [a] preserving cultural memory and identity, [b] confronting the past, and [c] understanding other cultures. As well as describing these approaches, I shall also consider specific criticisms that they have attracted (e.g. that they assumption a sort of "cultural essentialism").

4. The economic value of the Humanities

Economic benefit has to be understood in broad terms: it is not just a matter of monetary value, but also about business activity and employment. The economic defence can and has been made, especially in times of scarcity and where appeals for funding have to be made directly to finance ministries. Part of the economic case lies in the employability of Humanities graduates (see below, section 5). But there is also a case for saying Humanities research leads to economic benefit directly. [a] Businesses need to understand the cultures they operate in. This ought to involve the use of Humanities research from various disciplines. [b] Since the use of language is essential to business, so both literature and linguistics are important. [c] More specifically, the

Humanities contribute crucially to particular kinds of industry: they are responsible for productive output in the creative industries—e.g. theatre, film, TV drama, all of which are informed by Humanities research. The tourist industry depends in part on museums and other heritage institutions. When making all these kinds of claims, [a]-[c], defenders of the Humanities will also often point out that, compared to the Natural Sciences, Humanities research is cheap.

5. Education: the Liberal Arts

A very common argument, especially in the context of the US Liberal Arts, is that that an undergraduate education in the Humanities brings to its students benefits of many kinds—intellectual, cultural, moral—which in turn make them more employable, better contributors to society and (more generally still) lead better lives. As well as describing this approach, I shall consider some of the more plausible criticisms that have been made of it. I shall end by seeing how these criticisms might be addressed.

