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Why Study the Humanities When People Are Dying?

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(Received 06 July 2024; revised 23 August 2024; accepted 23 August 2024)

Abstract

Lately, my students have been asking: “Why should we be here, when there are people suffering out there?” Evidently, they are asking about the public value of higher education. But they are also asking old questions, some of the oldest that human beings have seen fit to ask. Versions of these questions appear in all scriptural traditions, in ancient and modern philosophical works, in stories and novels and songs. They are questions at the core of what we call “the humanities.” Part of why we study the humanities – and why we must – is to get help in asking, articulating, and trying to answer such questions. There aren’t single right answers to any of those questions. Each of us must work answers out for ourselves. But we can work out better answers for ourselves if we spend time in the company of others who take those questions seriously. This is not just an individual task; it’s a collective task of great public import. In this short piece, I defend the idea of the public humanities on these terms.

Keywords: campus politics; higher education; public humanities

I am a college professor, and lately my students have been obsessed with a single question. The more formal version – what they ask in class – is something like this: “How do we grapple with the profound contradiction between the privileged condition we inhabit on this campus and that of the oppressed subjects that we often study?”¹

The more casual versions of this question – what they ask each other in the dining hall – get more to the point: *Why should we be here, eating at buffets and talking about ideas, when there are people suffering out there? Why should we study the humanities when people are dying?*

This kind of question isn’t unique to my students or my college. If you watched or read interviews with campus protesters during the past year, or if you have participated in those protests yourself, you have encountered or asked something like it. A great refrain of those protests has been: *How can we be expected to sit quietly at our university, when there are no universities left in Gaza?*² *Why should we sit in safety here, when people are denied safety, out there?*

¹ This is a verbatim quotation from a Pomona Student Union event I attended in the spring of 2024.

² See, for instance, April 2024 statements by the Columbia Students for Justice in Palestine (April 22, 2024, accessed online at <https://twitter.com/ColumbiaSJP/status/1782461773783671197>) and the University at North Carolina Students for Justice in Palestine (April 28, 2024, accessed online at https://twitter.com/UNC_SJP/status/1784787133732929552).

But this kind of question isn't just something that you'll hear in pro-Palestinian encampments. Recently, when *The Harvard Crimson* asked four seniors to reflect on their time at Harvard, one of them summed up their entire college experience with the question: "Caught in a loop of vanity and complicity, how do we engage in a world that seems to take two steps back for every step forward?"³

These questions are also old questions, and not just in American higher education. They are some of the oldest questions that human beings have asked. Versions of these questions appear in all scriptural traditions, in ancient and modern philosophical works, in stories, novels, and songs. "How shall integrity face oppression?" That's W. E. B. Du Bois 1957.⁴ What is better: living in service to society or living in service to knowledge? That's *The Bhagavad Gita* 1911.⁵ Why on earth should we try to live a just life, when an unjust life offers such evident rewards? That's Plato 1968.⁶ How do you give dignity to others in an undignified world? That's Kurt Vonnegut 2009.⁷ How might we enable each other to thrive, when we are all just trying to survive? That's Octavia Butler 1993.⁸ "And when my time is up, will I have done enough?" That's Lin-Manuel Miranda (2015), channeling Eliza Hamilton.⁹ What should education look like in a culturally diverse and often segregated society? That's Ralph Ellison 1995.¹⁰ Why should we study the humanities at all? That's Hannah Arendt 2018.¹¹

In studying the humanities, we can help each other learn to confront – for ourselves each other – the questions that are central to living in a public, to the difficulties and opportunities that attend our common lives, and how our formal studies might fit into all that. In studying the humanities, we can come to understand better how the urgent questions of our time have historical precedent and cross-cultural significance. In studying the humanities, we can help each other take our questions seriously by asking them together, in the presence of those human beings before us who have taken the same questions seriously. We can come to understand the ways in which we are not alone – and have never been alone – in being troubled by the injustices and indignities that are endemic to our species. "You think your pain and heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read": that's James Baldwin Howard 1963.¹²

The humanities are not a magic pill. Even Socrates, bringing his A game, failed to move Glaucon and Adiemantus. They were would-be tyrants when they started talking to Socrates, and they remained pretty much the same after talking to him for hundreds of pages. You can lead people to Toni Morrison, but you can't make them think.

In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt (1958) notes that in this age of technological advancement, two things are happening at the same time: 1) there is an elevation of scientific and technological knowledge over humanistic forms of knowledge and 2) there is an expansion of the scope of the political, which demands of us the very kind of humanistic knowledge that is being discounted.¹³ Should there be limits on gene-editing technology?

³ Gashaw 2024.

⁴ Du Bois, 1957, 275.

⁵ *The Bhagavad Gita*, 1911, 62–69.

⁶ Plato 1968, 43.

⁷ Vonnegut 2009, 195.

⁸ Butler 1993.

⁹ Lin-Manuel Miranda 2015.

¹⁰ Ellison 1995, 65–66.

¹¹ Arendt 2018, 406–18.

¹² Howard 1963, 88.

¹³ Arendt 1958, 3.

Should college students be encouraged to rely on ChatGPT? When and how should weapons of mass destructions be used? The emergence of these technologies, and others, requires us to do serious political reflection. Humanistic knowledge is needed more than ever because we need practice and experience taking on big ethical questions.

When we agonize about our privilege in the dining hall or rage about our schools' support of "the system," we are hungering for the kinds of conversations that humanities education can provide. In this increasingly overwhelming, bureaucratic, technological, impersonal age, my students are, in the questions that predominate on campus, signaling their desire for more humanities education. There are classes on campus that provide resources to have our big public questions taken seriously, to realize that our personal questions are big public questions in the first place, to find cross-cultural, trans-historical company in asking those questions, to discover new ways to articulate and understand those questions, and maybe even to begin to figure out, for ourselves, how to live in a way that honors the enduring difficulty and importance of such questions.

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Acknowledgements. The author would like to thank Marjorie Duke Barndt, Benjamin Keim, and Maggie Li Zhang for conversations that informed this essay.

Author contribution. Conceptualization: S.M.B.; Writing – original draft: S.M.B.; Writing – review & editing: S.M.B.

Financial support. This research does not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Competing interest. The author declares none.

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Cite this article: McWilliams Barndt, Susan. 2025. "Why Study the Humanities When People Are Dying?." *Public Humanities*, 1, e19, 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2024.15>