



The End of the Humanities?!

Humanities?!

Why do we still need Liberal Arts and Humanistic Education in the Universities?

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Summary: The Crisis of Humanities

I argue that the humanities—philosophy, literature, history, and related disciplines—are in a deep crisis, as they are increasingly marginalized in modern universities dominated by STEM fields. I warn that this decline threatens the foundations of democratic societies, which rely on the critical thinking, empathy, and civic virtues fostered by a humanistic education.

I critique the belief that economic growth automatically leads to human development, highlighting the dangers of equating GDP with democratic health. I emphasize that science and technology, while vital, cannot replace the moral and reflective dimensions of human existence offered by the humanities.

The Philosophical Crisis and Its Resolution

The paper also explores the philosophical crisis regarding the relevance of philosophy, especially after the decline of traditional metaphysical beliefs. I reject both Logical Positivism (which reduces philosophy to logic) and Postmodernism (which denies objective truth), advocating instead for a balanced understanding of philosophy's moral and theoretical roles.

Citing thinkers like Hilary Putnam, I focus upon the inseparability of facts and values—even in science—and defend the enduring value of philosophy and the liberal arts in cultivating mature, responsible citizens.

Conclusion: Protecting Cultural Identity and Democracy

Without the humanities, we risk losing our cultural identity and democratic resilience. The essay is a call to protect and reinvest in humanistic education before it is too late.

I invite you to take the two title questions literally and very seriously, and not in a rather metaphoric way. And I hope that I can persuade you that they are not just rhetorical questions.

In a very recent book, called **Not for Profit. Why Democracy Needs the Humanities?** author Martha Nussbaum, who is an American Philosopher and Classicist, raises this issue of the end of the humanities in the most blatant and dramatic terms. The book is a powerful defense of the role of the humanities in education and democratic society. Here's a summary of the book's core ideas:

An illustration at the top of the page features a light beige background. At the top center, the words "Not For Profit" are written in a dark blue, sans-serif font. Below the text, three dark blue silhouettes of people are walking from left to right. The first silhouette is a person wearing a cap. The second and third silhouettes are a man and a woman walking together. To the right of the silhouettes, there are several vertical teal lines of varying heights and widths, and three orange, rounded shapes that resemble hills or abstract forms.

Martha Nussbaum's Main Argument

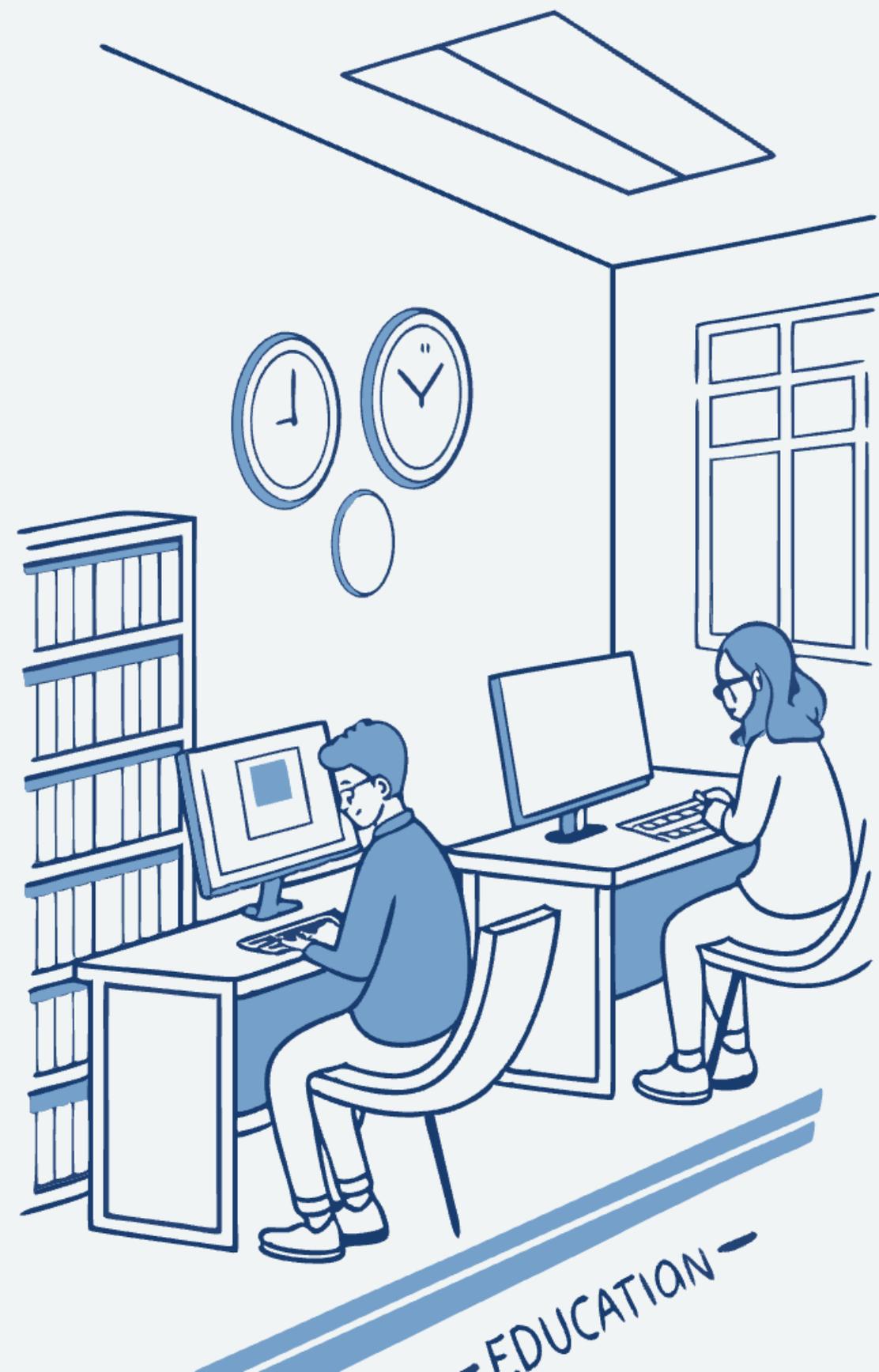
Main Argument

Nussbaum argues that a global shift toward utilitarian education—focused narrowly on economic growth and technical skills—is undermining democracy. She believes that the humanities (philosophy, history, literature, the arts) are essential for nurturing the critical thinking, empathy, and civic responsibility that democracies require.

Key Points: Crisis in Education

Crisis in Education

- Around the world, educational systems are increasingly oriented toward profitability and productivity.
- Governments and institutions are prioritizing STEM fields and vocational training while defunding or marginalizing the arts and humanities.





Key Points: Democracy Needs the Humanities

Democracy Needs the Humanities

- Democracies rely on citizens who can think critically, argue respectfully, understand different perspectives, and imagine the lives of others.
- Humanistic education fosters these capacities, while narrow job-oriented education may produce technically skilled but socially disengaged individuals.

Key Points: Cultivation of the “Whole Human Being”

The Cultivation of the “Whole Human Being”

- Drawing from Socratic philosophy, Nussbaum emphasizes that education should develop the ability to reason independently, not just perform economic functions.
- This includes training in critical self-examination, world citizenship, and narrative imagination.





Key Points: The Role of the Arts and Emotions

The Role of the Arts and Emotions

- Exposure to literature and the arts helps people develop empathy and emotional intelligence.
- These are crucial for moral reasoning and engaging with the challenges of pluralistic societies.



Key Points: Global Implications

Global Implications

- While focusing on the U.S., Nussbaum also critiques similar trends in India and other countries.
- She calls for a global movement to reinvest in the humanities as a foundation for democratic renewal.

Nussbaum's Conclusion: Resist Commodification

Nussbaum's book is a call to resist the commodification of education. She insists that we must protect the humanities not just for their intrinsic value, but because democracy itself depends on them.

This position is not singular. The work mentioned here combines a very lucid and compelling analysis of the waning of the role that the Humanities have played in contemporary universities with a somber prediction about a not-too-distant future in which we could assist to the complete shutting down of the departments and of the programs in the field of the liberal arts. This thing has already happened in countries with a well-established and well-entrenched democratic regime and with a higher-education system very well developed and articulated. And it is quite likely that this worrying movement will extend in the future.

The Silent Crisis: Economic Growth vs. Human Development

- A troubling paradox exists: while families prioritize financial literacy, they overlook diminishing humanities education. Literature, history, and philosophy—cornerstones of democratic societies—are increasingly devalued.
- This "silent crisis," as Nussbaum terms it, results from policymakers equating economic growth with human development. The flawed assumption that GDP growth automatically solves political problems and strengthens democracy undermines the humanities' essential role in fostering critical thinking and civic engagement.



Erosion of Democratic Qualities

The mistaken idea that "economic growth equals democratic development" ignores how education that minimizes humanities creates serious problems for citizenship in democratic societies. The great thinkers who helped build modern, free nations clearly saw how liberal arts and humanities help students develop critical thinking - a skill needed for independent action and for standing up to blind tradition and oppressive political power. Students of literature, history, and philosophy also learn to imagine what others experience, which builds empathy. This ability to understand others is crucial in addressing widespread cynicism and self-centeredness, making it essential for a healthy democracy to thrive.

The Questioned Role of Humanities in Higher Education

The role of liberal arts education has become an urgent issue, particularly for those serving humanities in universities. Globally, from Australia and Japan to the United States, humanities' purpose in education is increasingly questioned, diminished, or rejected. This situation compels us to ask: What is the goal of liberal arts in higher education? What role, if any, do humanities serve in a university landscape dominated by STEM disciplines (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics)?

The Painful Contrast: Rhetoric vs. Reality

A painful contrast exists between the rhetorical emphasis on humanities' importance—often from those who don't truly champion these values—and their diminished role, funding, and appreciation from public institutions, funding agencies, and university leadership.

I am not an obscurantist opposing scientific progress. On the contrary, as an analytic philosopher and logician educated in the scientific tradition, I appreciate the beauty and precision of scientific knowledge. I admire science's tremendous progress and its applications that benefit humanity and serve the greater good for increasing numbers of people.

Science as an Essential Dimension of European Culture

Science forms a cornerstone of European cultural identity. This pursuit of objective truth originated in Ancient Greece, where science and philosophy were unified in their quest to understand reality.

The objective, impersonal nature of scientific explanation creates tension with human values, subjectivity, and emotions. The key philosophical challenge remains: reconciling the objective world of science with the subjective realm of human experience.

Until we develop a framework integrating both objective and subjective dimensions, our understanding of the Universe—and our place within it—remains incomplete.



Why Do We Need Philosophy?

Let me raise a radical question: Why do we need philosophy at all in today's world?

Philosophy's traditional focus on metaphysical concepts—God and the immaterial soul—has been increasingly challenged. While 19th-century scientists often maintained religious beliefs, modern science has adopted a predominantly secular outlook, leading many to question philosophy's relevance.

This shift has prompted prominent thinkers to critique traditional philosophy. Heidegger proclaimed the end of onto-theology, while Wittgenstein redefined philosophy's purpose as "showing the fly the way out of the fly-bottle."

Why Do We Need Philosophy?

Meanwhile, advances in evolutionary biology, genetics, computer science, and neuroscience have undermined the concept of an immaterial mind, further distancing science from philosophical tradition. Though humanities remain valued disciplines, philosophy's foundations have been significantly challenged.

As Hilary Putnam pointedly asks: "Is philosophy really just a relic from past ages that we need either to discard or to replace with something else, even if we disguise the fact that the latter is what we are doing by retaining the word 'philosophy'?"

Failed Attempts to Justify Philosophy's Function

Logical Positivism

Two major 20th century philosophical movements—Logical Positivism and Postmodernism—failed to sufficiently justify philosophy's role.

Logical Positivism emerged from Mach's empiricism and Russell's mathematical logic. Rudolf Carnap summarized it in 1934: "All statements belonging to Metaphysics, regulative Ethics, and (metaphysical) Epistemology... are unverifiable and, therefore, unscientific... such statements are nonsense."

The movement held that meaningful statements must be scientifically verifiable, rendering traditional philosophy fields obsolete and reducing philosophy to merely the "logic of science."

Failed Attempts to Justify Philosophy's Function

Postmodernism

Postmodernism took the opposite approach, attempting to elevate philosophy by claiming science itself is merely a useful fiction, not fundamentally different from other Western ideologies.

Postmodernists like Jacques Derrida argued that all discourse is inherently deceptive, suggesting that truthful representation of reality is impossible. Despite its influence, Derrida's arguments ultimately failed to provide a convincing justification for philosophy.

The Dual Aspect of Philosophy

If both positivism (reducing philosophy to science) and postmodernism (calling science fiction) fail, what value remains in philosophy? Putnam references two helpful definitions: Cavell's "education of grownups" and Sellars' attempt "to understand how things in the broadest sense hang together."

These definitions reveal philosophy's dual nature: a moral side questioning our lives and cultures, and a theoretical side organizing knowledge. Putnam notes that exceptional philosophers excel at one aspect, while rare geniuses master both. Abandoning either dimension would constitute "intellectual suicide."

The science-philosophy tension often stems from misunderstanding the fact-value relationship. While many separate facts from values following Hume, Putnam argues they're interconnected, asserting that factual knowledge requires value judgments. Drawing from Wittgenstein and Quine, he challenges the notion that "facts are objective while values are subjective," showing their inseparable connection in scientific inquiry.

The Enduring Role of Humanities for Democracy

Philosophy remains vital despite claims of crisis. As Putnam argues, philosophy's persistent questions reflect our cultural identity, intertwining with scientific understanding rather than opposing it.

Liberal arts cultivate moral understanding and civic values essential for democracy, yet face concerning neglect in today's education systems.

By preserving cultural heritage, humanities prevent political decisions that contradict European traditions and undermine cultural identity.

We must defend humanities' critical role in universities and society to secure our collective future.

