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# The Useful Uselessness of the Humanities

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Stanley Fish responds to the question with which he titles his essay, "How Will the Humanities Save Us?" by objecting to its implicit assumption. As he puts it, "It is not the business of the humanities to save us." What, then, do they do? Fish answers:

> 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.

His voice here is not cynical, nor does he counsel despair, for he argues that it is precisely this doing-nothing, this inherent uselessness, of the humanities 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…diminishes the object of its supposed praise.

With these remarks Fish comes perilously close to being right. But he's not there yet. This is because he does not quite understand how in "doing" nothing, in failing to be useful or justifiable by reference to some value external to themselves, the humanities are actually useful. Their usefulness is indirect, no doubt minimal, and perhaps even paradoxical, but useful they nonetheless are. Such, at least, is the thesis I will propose.

Full disclosure: the view I endorse actually belongs to Aristotle. And so, after briefly sketching a few of Fish's arguments, I will devote the bulk of this short paper to some reflections about his *Metaphysics* and his *Politics.* In doing so, I will be forced to employ several Aristotelian notions that time will allow me neither to defend nor even to elaborate. I must, therefore, ask for the reader's willingness to entertain the propo-

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sition that, despite the formidable differences between the Aristotelian worldview and our own, on the issue that Fish raises there is sufficient commonality between them such that the comparison I offer will be germane.[1]

Fish begins his essay by asking the question regularly and properly faced by all of us who are in this business: "How does one justify funding the arts and humanities?" He quickly dismisses three familiar answers. First, "you can't argue," Fish says, "that a state's economy will benefit by a new reading of 'Hamlet.'" Second, he rejects the assertion that the "well rounded citizen" who can quote Shakespeare is a valuable commodity. Such an appeal may have had some "cash value" a century ago, but as a cultural ideal it is long gone. Finally, Fish rejects the position defended by Anthony Kronman in his book, *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life.* In the past, it was assumed that "a college was above all a place for the training of character, for the nurturing of those intellectual and moral habits that together form the basis for living the best life one can." Based upon his forty-five years in the profession Fish finds this preposterous. Humanists are good at analyzing texts, but no better than anyone else at being decent colleagues, citizens, friends, or parents. As mentioned at the outset of this paper, Fish concludes that the humanities are useless except for the pleasure they give to their practitioners. This is, he maintains, what brings them "honor": they are their own good. The humanities, then, are "auto-telic." They are complete, for they contain their "end" or "purpose" (*telos*) in themselves. What Fish fails to understand, but Aristotle does, is that this feature of the humanities not only confers honor upon them, but also makes them useful or practical, albeit in a highly indirect way. To explain, I must first turn to the *Metaphysics* and Aristotle's account of the genesis of knowledge.[2]

The process of knowing begins with perceptions, and then develops through memory and "experience" until it culminates in the attainment of knowledge. Differently stated, it progresses from awareness of particulars to an understanding of the universal: from simply knowing "that" to knowing the cause or the "why." "Knowledge," Aristotle

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explains, "comes to be whenever from many thoughts that have emerged from experience one universal conception emerges about these similar things" (981a5–7). Most relevant here is the distinction Aristotle draws between those who have knowledge, and so can offer a "rational account" of the cause, and those who are merely "experienced" and whose purview is thereby limited to "the particulars." When it comes to "acting," the latter, precisely because they are fluent in the particulars, may actually "succeed more often"—and thus be more obviously useful—than the former. To explain by updating Aristotle's own example: someone who has experienced the pain of many headaches, and then the relief that came from taking aspirin, may well advise a friend whose head hurts to do the same. And her recommendation may actually work. But she has no explanation for why it worked, and hence no real knowledge. The physician, by contrast, does. Nonetheless, even a physician with a firm grasp of the science of anatomy may goof in treating a patient precisely because the patient is particularized and thus only an incidental manifestation of a more general structure. Experience may be more useful than universal knowledge when dealing with real people (See 981a5–b1).

Aristotle concedes this limitation but nonetheless insists that genuine knowledge of the universal is superior to or more "honorable"—a word that he regularly uses—than even the most efficacious and "practical" forms of experience.[3] On this point he cites the Egyptian priests who were the first to develop pure or theoretical mathematics. They were able to do so because they were allowed "leisure" (981b25). They were "counted as wonderful by others" (981b15) not because they had "done" anything useful, but simply because they were "wiser." Theoretical knowledge is good, is the best, not for any consequence or specific application it may generate, but simply as an end in and of itself.

Aristotle's conception of theoretical knowledge is significantly different from what we take to be the humanities, or even from what we take to be theoretical knowledge, for it embraces the natural sciences, mathematics, and theology, as well as philosophy.[4] Nonetheless, it shares the central feature that Fish attributes to the humanities: it is auto-telic; it is its own good and so need not make any reference to an external result in order to justify itself. As Aristotle puts it, "it is clear that we

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do not seek such knowledge for any other need; but just as we say that someone who is for the sake of himself and not for another is free, so of the forms of knowledge this sort alone is free" (982b24–27).

I turn next to Book VII of the *Politics* where Aristotle sketches what he thinks is the "ideal" city. For the purpose of this essay, its salient feature is this:

> A single city, the one which governs in manifest fineness, could be happy with respect to itself, if it is possible for a city to live by itself using decent laws. Its form of government would not be directed towards war or domination of its enemies. (1325a1–4)

Aristotle's ideal city is self-contained and its army is strictly for the purpose of defense. It is not, in other words, expansionist or imperialistic. Instead, it is like an organic whole consisting of a set of dynamically interacting and mutually enabling parts. As such, it can be maximally active without needing to extend beyond its borders. Aristotle strikingly employs a metaphysical phrase to describe it: it is happy or complete "with respect to itself."[5] In other words, a city can be like a "substance," namely, a mode of being characterized by the highest degree of ontological independence. A substance does not depend on any other category for its being. By contrast, a quality (such as green) depends on there being a substance (such as a tree) in which it inheres. In an analogous fashion, a substance-like city would attain self-sufficiency and remain content to stay within its political borders and economic limits. By contrast, war-like or expansionist regimes reflect ontological confusion: they wrongly elevate the category of quantity over that of substance. As a consequence they are doomed to failure.

What Aristotle next develops is the symmetry that obtains between the best life attainable by an individual citizen and the city. Both share the same "end" or "goal" (*telos*) for they are each governed by the same principle: "the *telos* of war is peace, and of lack-of-leisure leisure" (1334a15–16). An individual requires leisure in order to live well—most important, in order to theorize (or to become a "humanist"). Analogously, a good city should aim to maintain the peace so that its best citizens can be free from the least leisurely of all activities, namely,

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"military and political actions."[6] In order for a city to achieve this goal, its citizens must be law-abiding and show moderation. When the city is attacked, they must be courageous enough to put on their armor and hold their positions in order to defend it. When there is peace they must be sufficiently patient in order to engage in political deliberation, and be well enough disciplined to resist those who urge the city to attack its neighbors or expand beyond its borders.

Distressingly, however, it is during peace that the trouble begins. In a brief statement that has terribly sobering consequences, Aristotle says:

> For war forces men to be just and moderate, while the enjoyment of good fortune and peaceful leisure makes them more violently arrogant. (1334a25–28)

As intrinsically desirable as both may be, peace and leisure are nearly impossible to sustain, for most men simply cannot tolerate them. Especially those with strong desires, those who are high-spirited and ambitious, become restless. They lack the ability to amuse themselves and the self-discipline required to use free time well. Unconstrained by external commands, they don't know what to do with themselves and so become ill-at-ease. With too much time on their hands, they get bored. They start pointless fights and do stupid things. That this regularly occurs is yet another expression of the dis-ease that Aristotle locates at the heart of ordinary human and political life: most people and cities mistake the source of their own happiness. They devote their best energy to the pursuit of wealth, power, or fame and thereby misconstrue the very meaning of their lives. They are incapable of appreciating the gift of leisure and so they disturb the peace. As a result, most young men are far better behaved when they are in uniform. Military discipline forces them to act in a moderate fashion and to take heed of the common good rather than simply indulging their own violent impulses or selfishly seeking their own pleasures.

War is for the sake of peace, lack-of-leisure is for the sake of leisure, but most men can tolerate neither peace nor free time. But therapy is available. For when it "comes to leisure" (1334a23), philosophy—in our lingo, one of the humanities—can play an instructive role. This is because it provides a paradigm for how to use leisure well. To reiterate, most people become restless or violent if no one tells them

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what to do. Not the philosopher, not the humanist. She does not need external constraint to keep her in line because the world—whether it is the natural world or the world written in text—is inexhaustible in its invitation to be studied, is always present as a source of wonder and amazement.

> For it is on account of wondering and being amazed that human beings both now and at first began to philosophize. At first, they were amazed and wondered about those oddities that were staring them in the face, and then little by little they progressed and became puzzled by greater questions; for example, about the changing attributes of the moon and the sun and stars, and about the becoming of the whole.
> (*Metaphysics* 982b12–17)

Aristotle's world is wonder-ful, beautiful, intelligible, nourishing and welcoming. For those who use their intellects, it promises rewards greater than money, power, or fame. Thus can philosophy, the theorizing of the world, satisfy even the most restless of souls.

Perhaps surprisingly, it is here that Aristotle locates the practical contribution that philosophers, or for the purpose of this essay "humanists," make to the well-being of their communities. By engaging in an activity valuable in and of itself, they function as a paradigm of how to use leisure well. As such, they are reminders to ordinary citizens that the too familiar urge to succeed in the city, and thereby to achieve a good whose only value is instrumental, is wrong-headed. Humanists thus exhibit a *telos* of human activity without which there would be nothing for human beings to strive for but more of the same: more power, wealth, or fame, each of which is in principle infinite, that is, without-an-end.

To reiterate the caution offered above: there are a host of differences between Aristotle's worldview and our own. There was, after all, a fierce battle waged between the Ancients and the Moderns, which the former decisively lost. His version of philosophy, for example, is quite unlike our own, and his conception of a moderately-sized city that is resolutely local as it concentrates its energy on the well-being only of its own citizens is outdated in the age of globalization. Still, Aristotle's account of how theoretical knowledge (indirectly) benefits a city can be suggestive even at this late date. We live in an age in which work has

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almost entirely supplanted leisure, in which expansion is the norm, in which (most likely) peace is no longer the *telos* of war.[7] In our universities, "research," indeed science itself, must be applicable in order to be counted as valuable (and hence worth funding). Indeed, all intellectual activity is called upon to produce useful and measurable results. In these frantic times, the useless humanist, reading her books, crafting her essays, teaching her students, is the anomaly. But it is precisely in being anomalous that she illuminates the nature and limitation of all the other putatively more practical and apparently justifiable pursuits. They are for the sake of something other than themselves, while her work alone is for the sake of itself.

Stanley Fish comes close to being right about the value of the humanities. They "do" nothing and certainly cannot save us. Despite the proliferation of "applied ethics" courses in American universities, they are unable to make either their students or their teachers more moral human beings. (In other words, after twenty-five years in this profession, I have come to the same conclusion that Fish has in his forty-five: members of literature and philosophy departments are hardly among "the most generous, patient, good-hearted and honest people on earth.") Nonetheless, the humanities are not useless. Precisely in being and celebrating their own lack of instrumentality, in defiantly proclaiming their own auto-telic nature, they serve a purpose: exhibiting a paradigm to a community that is preoccupied with more "practical" concerns. Doing so hardly leads to immediate or specific benefits. Reading Shakespeare won't solve global warming. But without the humanities, without the pursuit of what Aristotle called theoretical knowledge, the city would be composed only of citizens who are constantly in pursuit of goods whose attainment leads only to further pursuit of more of the same.

Aristotle's justification of theoretical knowledge, or philosophy, or by extension the humanities, is at best thin. Still, he identifies the peculiar civic value of a philosopher. Even if she wields no applied science and has an audience too small to become politically powerful, she nonetheless displays to her fellow citizens a fundamental human possibility: namely, that one can engage in an activity that is valuable in and of itself. This is a possibility worth taking seriously…and even funding.

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## Notes

1. In "Aristotle's Defense of the Theoretical Life: Comments on *Politics* VII" (Roochnik 2008), I argue in detail for the same position that I present here only in outline.
2. Translations of Aristotle are my own. The Greek texts are the Oxford editions of W.D. Ross (1942).
3. For a representative example of how Aristotle uses the word "honorable," see *Metaphysics* 981a31.
4. In my estimation theoretical knowledge also includes ethics and politics, but this is a controversial claim.
5. In the *Metaphysics* this phrase is said to refer to "the essence of a being (1022a26).
6. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1177b5–6.
7. For an invigorating discussion of the role of leisure in culture, as well a lament for its disappearance, see Pieper 1963.

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