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Arts, Humanities, Sciences, Uses

Brian Boyd

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Abstract

We should not define the “uses” of the arts and humanities against the sciences. Nor, in our finite world, should we resist asking what their uses are. The long perspective of science helps us see that art, which might seem the most useless of all major forms of human activity, can reshape minds and societies by its very freedom from immediate use. Fiction in particular has led to an expansion in sympathy and a decline in social harm, and like all the arts prompts the imagination to envisage richer purposes in a richer world. Given that we need to imitate in order to innovate, the arts and the humanities, as seedbanks of the human past, make a world of difference. In our ultrasocial species, our arts, our sciences, our societies are humanities, all the way down. If we currently section off science, medicine, engineering, architecture, economics, and fine arts, even these specialisms are also all humanities, the product of human action, thought, inquiry, accumulation, contestation and preservation. In the core humanities, where we examine what we humans think and do, have thought and done, and might think and do, we need to focus more on creative problem-solving in the past and how that can help engender creativity in the present and future. At

their best the arts and the humanities, like the best science, critique themselves, both building on and challenging what has gone before. A poem by Szyborska and a novel by Nabokov show how creativity and critique, by exploring the possibility beyond the actual, help extend what is actually possible.

Arts, Humanities, Sciences, Uses

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TO ASSESS THE "USES" OF THE ARTS and humanities, we should not start by aligning them *against* the sciences. In reaction to funders seeking quick financial savings and returns by shifting resources from the arts toward the applied end of the sciences, the humanities tend to define and defend themselves against science—as, most recently, in the May 2013 report, *The Teaching of the Arts and Humanities at Harvard College: Mapping the Future*.¹ But for the arts and humanities to see the sciences as the Other would be a mistake.

We need to resist short-sighted short-term pressures on the academic arts and humanities by taking the longest-term view we can—and not simply the long-term view that many in the humanities would normally take, looking back to the Renaissance or to Rome and Greece. The long view of cosmology reaches back almost fourteen billion years, the long view of evolution on earth almost four billion years. Discoveries in science have forced us to rethink what we are, what the "human" is that the humanities focus on. We have been radically decentered within the cosmos, and we now recognize that, far from having been made by the hand and in the image of an all-knowing God, we have been thrown up by a blind process with no goal of developing minds aligned with reason or aimed at truth. We have a jerry-built brain, what neuroscientist Daniel Linden calls an "accidental mind."² The traces of our animality and our accidental emergence on our small planet threaten our sense of our humanity.

Nevertheless our evolving into sociality and culture enables us to learn from our mistakes—including our mistakes in thinking we were life's linchpin. We can partially overcome the limitations of our animality through the very difficult negotiations of our sociality. To achieve what we do in art, science, or society involves knowing ourselves and understanding and enriching our purposes—and, unavoidably, our cross-purposes. Our arts, our sciences, our societies are humanities, all the way down.

To ask whether the creative arts or the academic humanities have any use is not just a perfectly legitimate but even a necessary question. We live in a world of limited resources, in a world where living things strive



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2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
[+1 \(410\) 516-6989](tel:+14105166989)
muse@press.jhu.edu



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