

death? What should we *do* about it? How does the shadow of death affect the way we live life? Religions offer some answers to these questions. The study of religions offers thoughts about the answers.

We need the humanities because, if anything can outweigh death, it is love. Are you interested? How can *anything* outweigh death? Where should we look for such a thing? Mathematics can be elegant; science beautiful; sociology informative; engineering efficient. But these aren't the places to go in search of love. Where have people gone to understand love? To celebrate it? Around the world, and from ancient times, people have turned to: poems, songs, stories, paintings, sculpture—in short, the humanities. Try it! It can work for you, too.

Get to Know the Past

We need the humanities because human beings have memories. Memory is our primary access to the past, yet it is notoriously unreliable. In two ways, it fades: individual memory impressions fade with time, and the power of memory in general fades as we age. To make things worse, memory can distort. We sometimes remember things not as they were but as we would have wished them to be. Nostalgia can make the past gleam. I remember sunny days catching bluegills as a boy; I do not remember getting fishhooks stuck in my finger. Mark Twain observed that *his* memory actually *gained* power with age, until, in his senior years, why, he could remember things that didn't even happen. This is one reason why we need historians, who are another kind of humanist, to help us figure out the past. Historians rely on human memory, to be sure, but also on other kinds of evidence—documents, monuments, relics, paintings, photographs—and,

sorting and sifting evidence rather as a detective does, historians try to piece together a picture of what happened.

And why do we need that picture? Is the past a kind of mirror, that can help us to see ourselves better and to improve, as the great Chinese historian Sima Guang believed when he penned his "Comprehensive Mirror to Aid Government"? Does history contain learnable lessons, as George

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Santayana apparently believed when he said those who remain ignorant of the past "are condemned to repeat it"? Maybe. Why should we second-guess minds of the caliber of Sima's or Santayana's? But even if knowing human history had no practical value, isn't it important that we know it anyway? Isn't this in a way parallel to knowing that the wilderness is still there? Are we not somehow better—richer—when we understand history? At a minimum, isn't it just more fun?

We need the humanities because, just as things gleam in the past, so they can gleam in the future, too. We get joy from anticipating and imagining. Have you ever noticed that anticipating Christmas, or a day at the zoo with children, or a visit from Aunt Hilda, is sometimes more fun than actually living through these events? Here anticipation and fiction have something in common. In both cases we get to live in imagined scenes that, just because they are

not complicated by all of the warts and pebbles of actuality, are somehow cleaner, purer, more powerful, more moving—in any case more *something*. This is why ghost stories, told orally, can be more frightening than picture books, and why radio fiction is sometimes more vivid than television.

Get to Know Yourself

We need the humanities because it is hard to get to the bottom of the question "Who am I?" My roles can be listed, of course: I am a husband, a father, a teacher, a tennis player, an American, a fan of anyone who will beat the Yankees, and a UCR professor whose grocery bill gets paid because society has decided to value something that it calls "the humanities." But none of these labels, somehow, gets us to the bottom of things. The question still stares: Who *am* I, after all the labels are peeled off? Anything? Nothing? It *feels* as if something is there. What is that? What can we call it? The self? Consciousness?

We need the humanities because we can imagine that nothing exists *except* my consciousness. Everything else might be nothing but the sense data that compose it. This view is called solipsism. Solipsism actually makes perfect sense logically speaking, but most of us don't accept it just because it seems so weird.



What do all these smiling people have in common? Why, their need for the humanities, of course!

We *want* to believe that an outside world exists, independently of our sense data. But watch out. As soon as you take that step, Cartesian dualism, and the mind-body problem, fall into your lap. Now there's a truly tough problem. If you think the humanities are all touchy-feely and squishy-wishy, watch out for the mind-body problem. It's like an optical illusion in blue steel.

Get to Know Others

We need the humanities because, if we decide not to be solipsists, then we have to face the fact that there are many other people in the world and that it's not going to be easy to get to know all of them. Even our next-door neighbor can be a mystery. What to do? Read. Good novels can bring us inside other people's lives, even as we stay at home, recumbent in our favorite chairs. Stories can bring us across oceans, across cultures, and out of limitations that we didn't even know we

had. Learning about other cultures helps us to understand not only those other cultures, but our own as well. One of the best ways to learn about one's own culture is to realize that stuff one has always taken for granted, when viewed from another angle, ain't necessarily so.

And finally, we need the humanities because humanity itself is something that we all share. Not all of us are electricians. Physicians. Opticians. Beauticians. Obstetricians. Morticians. Statisticians. Nor need we be. We can parcel out these jobs, some doing some, some others, training for them as specialists. But we can't divvy up being human, and that makes all of the humanities our common ground. Who among us does not use language, have a moral sense, laugh, or know beauty when we see it? Which one of us is not going to die, or does not need love? These are all things that we share. We have to share them. They can-

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not be delegated. And that means that there's something very special about being able to meet someone-anyone, anywhere--look the person in the eye and say, "Hey, sister! Hey, brother! We share the humanities, and how are you, today?"

Get to Know...



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