

## Would You Hire Socrates?

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**Abstract:** How many parents are going to pay for their kids to take Ethical Theory so that they can perform better at Goldman Sachs? I've yet to have a student read Aristotle's "Metaphysics" and exclaim, "This is really going to pay dividends at IBM!" Thinking of the value of the humanities predominately in terms of earnings and employment is to miss the point.

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**Full text:** The myth that studying the humanities doesn't pay was recently exploded by the Association of American Colleges and Universities and the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems. Their study, released in January, analyzed Census Bureau data on the education and occupation of about three million U.S. residents. It found that "at peak earnings ages (56-60 years) workers who majored as undergraduates in the humanities or social sciences earn annually on average about \$2,000 more than those who majored as undergraduates in professional or pre-professional fields."

Their study showed that the overwhelming majority of employers are desperate to hire graduates who have "a demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems." These are the very skills that we associate with the study of the humanities.

As someone who teaches philosophy at a community college, I'm grateful for such efforts to defend the liberal arts from the current assaults against them. But I have my doubts that selling philosophy as a path to future riches is going to be effective. How many parents are going to pay for their kids to take Ethical Theory so that they can perform better at Goldman Sachs? I've yet to have a student read Aristotle's "Metaphysics" and exclaim, "This is really going to pay dividends at IBM!"

Thinking of the value of the humanities predominately in terms of earnings and employment is to miss the point. America should strive to be a society of free people deeply engaged in "the pursuit of happiness," not simply one of decently compensated and well-behaved employees.

A true liberal-arts education furnishes the mind with great art and ideas, empowers us to think for ourselves and appreciate the world in all its complexity and grandeur. Is there anyone who doesn't feel a pang of desire for a meaning that goes beyond work and politics, for a meaning that confronts the mysteries of life, love, suffering and death?

I once had a student, a factory worker, who read all of Schopenhauer just to find a few lines that I quoted in class. An ex-con wrote a searing essay for me about the injustice of mandatory minimum sentencing, arguing that it fails miserably to live up to either the retributive or utilitarian standards that he had studied in Introduction to Ethics. I watched a preschool music teacher light up at Plato's "Republic," a recovering alcoholic become obsessed by Stoicism, and a wayward vet fall in love with logic (he's now finishing law school at Berkeley). A Sudanese refugee asked me, trembling, if we could study arguments concerning religious freedom. Never more has John Locke -- or, for that matter, the liberal arts -- seemed so vital to me.

I'm glad that students who major in disciplines like philosophy may eventually make as much as or more than a business major. But that's far from the main reason I think we should invest in the humanities.

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