Re-Imagining the Public Value of the Humanities: An Ecological Perspective

by

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Abstract

Much of the recent discussion regarding the humanities has been in response to the destabilizing effects economic pressures have on perceptions of their value. I explore the public value of the humanities in light of these contemporary challenges. Chapter One situates this approach in a public conception of the university. In Chapter Two I discuss how the aims of higher education are being reshaped, largely in response to an instrumentalist context that is framed by economic outcomes. In Chapter Three I review three defences of the humanities—subjective, liberal, and democratic—and how they address the question of public value, respectively. I conclude by arguing for an ecological approach to the humanities, grounded in the broader value of the university to the public it serves, and argue that working inwards from a situated position may provide a more robust account of public value than many of the previous attempts.
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1 Much like our shared appreciation for chocolate.

2 I hope that my choice of the term “reconstruction” is appreciated.

3 Lauren used this term on one of our first meetings, and I have chosen to run with it.
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Introduction

The humanities are a rich and longstanding body of disciplines within the academy, which have served as one of the oldest modes of academic scholarship and inquiry. Today, however, many observers feel that the humanities have fallen from the prestigious position they historically held. Much of the recent discussion regarding the humanities has been a response to the destabilizing effects of dominant economic pressures exerted by policy makers, public perception, and administrative directives within the university itself. The aims of education are being reshaped, largely in response to an instrumentalist context that is framed by economic outcomes. These shifts, both at the policy and the internal levels, have been driven by the increasing influence of globalization, austerity, and the economic focus of nation states.

The tension between the humanities and the culture of economic instrumentalism has created an unfavourable situation for those who aim to continue the tradition of the humanities in the academy. In particular, many of the recent changes in administrative policies and priorities for teaching and research in the university, have been perceived as jeopardizing the future of the humanities. This trend results largely from the growing pressure on universities to justify themselves as public institutions, by producing practical and quantifiable benefits. However, the humanities typically do not produce highly sought-after scientific discoveries or innovative technologies. Nor do the graduates of humanities departments find themselves directly poised for vocational prospects.

Instead, the value of the humanities is often regarded by its advocates as cultural and qualitative, long-term, and difficult to measure. The humanities are generally regarded as a body of disciplines which study human culture and artifacts, by focusing on interpretation and meanings. The intangibility of the benefits of these disciplines through economic instrumentalism has
generated a great deal of discussion on the worth of the humanities. My aim is to bring the various defences of the humanities together, and to analyze these diverse approaches in addressing the particular practical, and ideological challenges that these disciplines face today. In doing so, I appeal to public value as the most important standard for evaluating the humanities, within the context of higher education. By this focus, I hope to clarify the relevant questions and arguments that are necessary for the present conversation.

The objective of the first chapter is to provide a philosophical grounding for a discussion of the public aims of higher education. This discussion will explore what the public dimension of society is, and how public education has emerged in response the needs of the public. I explore the role of the university by discussing the fundamental connection between education and the public, and then how this link develops with respect to higher education. Accordingly, I position the university within a public framework. This framework informs my understanding of what the university is, and provides the context for discussing the university’s value. I invoke this discussion to position public value as the proper basis for discussing the value of the humanities.

In the second chapter, I look at how the sense of public value has been reconfigured by the growing dominance of economic instrumentalism. The example of corporatization in higher education will be used to illustrate this phenomenon. After providing a cursory outline of some of the ways in which economic values affect the aims of the university, I turn to reviewing the broader philosophies that underlie these effects. In particular, I discuss how the overemphasis on economic values, as exemplified by economic efficiency, has led to a kind of narrow instrumentalism. Next, I engage more deeply in a critique of narrow instrumentalism and the larger challenges it poses to the public good. The critique I make concerns the narrow and highly instrumental manner in which the aims of higher education are increasingly pursued. In particular, I discuss how narrow
instrumentalism inhibits the public’s ability to deliberate and act in an informed manner. Such instrumentalism, therefore, undermines the foundations of a deliberative and effective public body.

In the third chapter, I build on my analysis of the effects that narrow instrumentalism has had on educational philosophy and policy, particularly in regard to the arts and humanities. This chapter will provide an exegesis of what I take to be three important arguments in defence of the humanities. I categorize these three defences as 1) the subjective account, which focuses on the benefits of enhanced individual worth and experience derived from studies in the humanities; 2) the liberal account, which emphasizes the contribution of the humanities to liberal education; and 3) the democratic defence, which argues that the humanities are indispensable for the cultivation of democratic citizens. I argue that various aspects of each approach fail to address the pragmatic connections between the humanities, the public, and the wider set of academic disciplines. These disconnections re-produce the dichotomies between theoretical and practical knowledge, as well as the narrow disciplinary divisions, which undermine the potential of the humanities for empowering educational, personal, and social development.

In the final chapter, I build on my critique of the previously outlined accounts of the humanities to present a more comprehensive approach to evaluating these disciplines. Having shown that the previous defences are insufficient due to their narrowness of focus, I argue that an ecological approach to assessing the humanities avoids the pitfalls of insularity and inconsistency, and provides a strengthened defence that is grounded in the broader value of the university to the public it serves. I suggest that looking “outwards” is an enabling step towards a reciprocal methodology and an ecological perspective.

Before continuing, however, something more needs to be said about the object of this thesis, that is, about the humanities themselves. Just as there are differing accounts concerning the worth of the humanities, there are various definitions of what the humanities are. However, some
common threads run through most accounts, with respect to the contents and methods of these disciplines. In general, the focus of the humanities is taken to be the human subject and its interactions with the world. Often, this investigation is grounded in the study of culture and of meaning-making practices. A relatively uninflected definition is provided by Christopher Bertram: “the humanities are the branch of inquiry that depends on interpretation and understanding in order to make sense of the world that human beings have made, of their culture, history, behaviour, and artifacts.”\(^4\)

An important aspect of the humanities is their disciplinary focus with respect to method. The humanities are largely seen as being concerned with meaning, and the meaning-making practices, which produce and shape culture. In contrast to the natural and social sciences, the primary method of the humanities is often considered to be interpretive, with an emphasis on the value of subjective thought for the study of meaning itself. Small reiterates the importance of subjectivity in the humanities, by noting that these disciplines cannot base their truth claims solely on positivistic appeals to evidence, but also require the exercise of judgment.\(^5\) For Small, meaning and culture are the defining elements in studies of the humanities: “the humanities study the meaning-making practices of human culture, past and present, focusing on interpretation and critical evaluation, primarily in terms of the individual response and with an ineliminable element of subjectivity.”\(^6\)

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\(^6\) Small, The Value of the Humanities, 23. I have chosen the definitions provided by Bertram and Small because they are decidedly self-reflective descriptions of the humanities that do not aim to embed value judgments in their definitions.
According to the authors of *Mapping the Future*, one of the most vital contributions of the humanities is that they cultivate our ability to describe and evaluate experience, as well our ability to imagine transforming it. As these authors argue,

A culture of the Humanities enables us, that is, satisfyingly to describe, and thereby give precise voice to, sets, and subsets, of our most vital emotional and cognitive experience. All of us, whether we know it or not, have habitual recourse to the language of art criticism and philosophy because art and philosophy are “where the meanings are” (or at least a good deal of them!); the terms of art and philosophy are the irreplaceable, companionable forms to our articulate reception of the world, without which we fall painfully mute.\(^7\)

Furthermore, these authors argue that the deep personal engagement fostered by the humanities is a condition, which allows for the evaluation and imaginative transformation of our experience. Embedded in this particular view is a sense of connection between the study of the humanities and the way we live. That is, that the humanities are implicative and transformative not only in shaping our knowledge and ideas, but also in enriching our engagement with life and our ability to evaluate it. As they claim,

the capacity precisely to describe experience of the world also, however, provokes *evaluation* of the world, through the act of deliberative criticism. The very word “criticism,” deriving from Greek “krites,” meaning “judge,” signals the profound connections between descriptive reception and reparative evaluation of the world: our rigorous, receptive responsiveness to art and philosophy provokes, that is, an answering responsibility to the world. We are emboldened, not to say impelled, by the voice we derive from experience of the immense Humanities archive to answer, as critics, not merely to the work of art but to the world at large.\(^8\)

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One important clarification to keep in mind, however, is that the humanities are not the same as the objects which they study. This is necessary for avoiding misrepresentation or overrepresentation of what the humanities are and what they do.

A final point to be made about the humanities is their historical lineage. As several authors have noted, the nature of the humanities themselves, and the disciplines and borders which define them, have been re-defined over the course of history. The tradition of the liberal arts, which the humanities are an important part of, can be traced to antiquity. However, it was only during the Middle Ages that these disciplines were established within the university curriculum. Of course the “humanities” of the Middle Ages had a different form and emphasis from the study as broadly practiced today. The Renaissance, however, saw important shifts towards what we now characterize as the humanities:

The *studia humanitatis*, which distinguished certain fields of study (above all, rhetoric, philology and history), from theology, and which later maintained its separation from science, represents the central contribution of Renaissance Humanism to a lasting intellectual and pedagogic tradition that transcends the moment of its origins. Influenced by humanism (both civic and Christian), the framework of education expanded to include historical and philological inquiry, which were closely connected with one another.

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11 For instance, in keeping with Platonic thinking, poetry and literature were excluded from the liberal tradition.

Another important shift was the secularization of the university in the 19th century, by which both the university and humanities moved away from their previous denominational character as undertaken in preparation for the clergy. This period was characterized by the study of vernacular languages alongside Greek and Latin, the development of art history as a discipline, and the study of comparative literature and linguistics alongside classical philology.\textsuperscript{13}

This summary of the stages in the history of the humanities is by no means exhaustive. Rather, this description is a cursory analysis of the changing nature, purpose, and context studies in the humanities have taken. The historical contingencies of what we call “humanities” are emphasized to different degrees by different authors. The stages by which these disciplines developed seem unimportant for some observers. For others, the evolution of the humanities over time indicates a non-essentialist and non-binary quality of these disciplines. My conclusion to this thesis will aim to emphasize the latter of these views.

Chapter 1
Defining the Humanities as a Public Good

1.1 Arguments for a Public Account of Value

I would like to begin by positioning my discussion of the humanities, and their role in higher education, as primarily concerned with the public value these disciplines bring. The question of the humanities is topical in today’s educational climate, but the issue also has a long and rich historical lineage. Arguments for the humanities have been intimately intertwined with the ideals of liberal education, and with the deeper question of what is worth teaching at all. The goal of my project is not to reject the many defences of the humanities that have already been given, nor is it to provide a singular criterion of value for the humanities. Instead, the main aim is to bring these various accounts into conversation with the philosophical analyses and critiques of the humanities (which often exist in the literature itself), and thereby critique what I believe is a problematic method of argument that is common to the various accounts I review. Many of these problems have already been described in one way or another by other authors. My aim here is to provide a more robust theoretical articulation of the common consequences of these critiques, and to show how they can be utilized to re-position the humanities.

I start with a discussion the term “value”, as it is broadly conceived, in order to provide a focus for the assertions of value that I will later review. The term “value” has many referents: moral, economic, social, aesthetic—none of which are neatly reducible to subcategories of the others. Values can refer to what we value (that is, the worth, good, or importance something has), or to our beliefs and ideals about how we should live and conduct ourselves. Not only are there many different values, but there are different kinds of values. The question of value is therefore contextual, depending on the kinds of values we are talking about. As is discussed in Chapter Two,
the attempt to collapse educational value into economic terms produces tensions and difficulties, which illustrate the problematic consequences of misappropriated or reductive values.

The humanities have made claims to many different kinds of value, with respect to their personal appeal, their aesthetic worth, the pleasure they produce, the social conscience they may foster, or the kinds of knowledge they represent. It can be argued, as Helen Small’s critical taxonomy of this subject suggests, that the humanities do, in fact, have many claims to value; and any account that aims to define their worth is likely to be pluralistic in nature. I would, however, like to practice some discrimination when proposing the question of value. What kind of value are we speaking of? What is the context in which value requires definition? For whom and by whom is the value being questioned or decided?

The lineage of ideas about the humanities is rich and diverse. According to some scholars, the humanities are a great source of personal intellectual pleasure or fulfillment, and a rich source of personal guidance. Such an account is given by John Stuart Mill in defence of historical and philosophical works that engage the imagination. Mill’s view is grounded in his own experience of a personal crisis, in which “reading certain works of literature rescued him from the narrow ends-driven conception of happiness instilled in him by his utilitarian education.” This experience, in turn, shapes Mill’s thoughts on utilitarianism, and leads him to take a more

14 Small proposes a taxonomical approach to arguing for the value of the humanities by seeking to articulate the strongest version of traditional arguments made in their favor.

15 Small, The Value of the Humanities, 89-90.

16 Ibid., 93.
qualitative approach to assessing pleasure than Bentham does. Mill’s view, however, essentially falls into line with a view of the humanities as a good in and of themselves.

For other observers, the humanities represent a collection of profound ideas and truths about humanity and the world we inhabit—the “great works.” This is a more classical view, which today faces numerous criticisms for its emphasis on “the canon,” or on the “repositories of supposedly superior Western cultural values.” Nonetheless, this approach seems embedded, to various degrees, in the ways that many modern scholars conceive of the humanities. For example, in the 1984 report To Reclaim a Legacy, Bennett argues that the humanities are “the best of what has been said, thought, written, and otherwise expressed about human experience.” The humanities have also often been seen as intimately connected with the goals of liberal education, whether those goals concern the cultivation of autonomous individuals or of liberal democratic society. The humanities have been revered as one key, or even the key to a liberal society, particularly when studied under a liberal arts model of higher education.

Various theorists have proposed a range of defences for the humanities by appealing to each of these various accounts of value. Today, despite the many kinds or locations of value described previously, discussions of the humanities are often focused on the place of these disciplines within higher education. The humanities presently face a novel set of challenges in the context of public universities, largely as a result of economic constraints and the ways in which accountability is outlined with regards to public institutions. This situation represents a notably


18 William J. Bennett, To Reclaim a Legacy: A Report on the Humanities in Higher Education (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Humanities, 1984), 16. This is notably a contentious assertion. However, I have included it to illustrate the spirit in which the humanities are discussed in some of the literature I have reviewed.
different context from that, in which scholars may be asked “why the humanities?” by their sceptical family members; or in which a literature professor may aim to persuade colleagues in the chemistry department that literature is a worthwhile course of scholarly pursuit. It is important to note that the humanities have long been questioned as a body of disciplines or a way of thinking by those committed to empirical thinking and practical outcomes. This kind of questioning was emphasized, for example, in C.P Snow’s discussion of the humanities and sciences in *The Two Cultures.*

However, the kinds of questions being asked of the humanities today have changed, in that they now concern public benefit of such knowledge. Education, including higher education, is largely a public-supported activity, undertaken for the sake of goals valued by the public. The challenges that the humanities face today echo previous tensions, such as the two cultures rift, or the questions of theoretical practicality arising from ongoing practical-theoretical debates in the university. Today’s challenge, however, is a largely a pragmatic one, involving debates about the distribution of public resources and the public value of the university itself. My emphasis, again, is with respect to how prevailing circumstances have shaped which questions about the value of the humanities are deemed most pertinent. In the present context for this debate, the foremost question I aim to address is whether the humanities possess public value.

There are two reasons why I centre my approach on the issue of public value. The first reason is rooted in a perspective of the university as an important part of the public sphere. Recent

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20. Even if the question of public value may be implied in other discussions.
changes in higher education, including the emergence of for-profit universities and the increasing privatization of education, call into question the public value of the university compared to the private value or benefit it produces.\textsuperscript{21} In many Western countries, the university system is composed, to some extent, of a mix between private and public higher education institutions, with some notable differences between them. There are also many general similarities among the higher education systems of these countries. Substantial overlap in literature about the aims and circumstance of their university system, respectively, suggest that they face some common challenges with respect to the question of their public value. The debates about the university as a public good, in today’s political environment, tend to address the humanities as they pertain to higher education, and in terms of the public good they provide. In a sense, the large-scale debates conducted across countries such as Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom concerning the public role of their respective university systems, illustrate the need to address this overarching question, and to consider the value of the humanities within a public framework.

The second reason I emphasize public value involves the series of social challenges that society has faced in recent years. In a time of austerity, of competing political and economic ideologies, and of enduring social inequalities, a defence of the humanities should be derived from a theory that acknowledges our real-world dilemmas and conditions. That is, a defence of the humanities in a public context requires connection to real-world concerns and considerations if it is to be deemed meaningful. These concerns can only be addressed when the question of the humanities is asked within a framework that acknowledges their place in the broader real-world equation.

\textsuperscript{21} Not necessarily in the sense that all universities should be public, but that public universities have an important place in society.
The questions facing the humanities are partly ideological, but they are also genuine practical dilemmas in education. Not all defences of the humanities address public questions such as why such studies should be funded by tax dollars, why they necessarily belong in public education, or why they should be taught in a particular institution. These questions reflect important challenges faced by politicians and university administrators. These questions also shed light on some of the issues faced by those who attend university. Dealing with these concerns does not necessarily restrict the conversation to the specific languages or ways of thinking employed by politicians and policy makers. Nor does it mean that the justifications given cannot be connected to the more abstract arguments in favour of the humanities. However, dealing with these pragmatic concerns does require that any account of value for the humanities must, in some way, connect to and address the public context and the realities against, or within which, the account aims to justify itself.

A public approach incorporates the idea of accountability, while at the same time democratizing the conversation by addressing shared concerns and parameters. As Christopher Bertram argues,

The liberal principle of legitimacy says that the policies of government and the institutions of society face a justificatory burden. They have to be capable of being justified to all of those over whom state power is exercised. On this view of state power, the public power, the res publica, belongs to all of its citizens.22

One of the important arguments that Bertram provides for a liberal justification approach is grounded in its public appeal, namely the beneficial role that higher education plays in society, despite the different forms that role may take. Echoing John Rawls, Bertram argues that higher

education is a part of society’s basic structure, and it “has huge effects on how citizens’ lives turn out, both individually and compared to one another.” The liberal justification approach, with its emphasis on collective justification, disqualifies defences of the arts and humanities (at least with respect to state support and provision) if those defences involve aesthetic, moral, or religious purposes that are not accessible, or are not in some way shared by all citizens. In a liberal society committed to freedom from coercion, any act by the governing authorities must be justified to the members of the society. For this reason, the nature of the justification given must be intelligible and appreciable, not just by a select few, but by all, despite the public’s divergent opinions. For instance, under the principle of liberal justification, a law should not be enacted based on the religious beliefs of a select group of individuals, but should be grounded in widely shared concepts of justice and moral reasoning.

Despite these restrictions on what constitutes a justification for policy, the principle of liberal justification does not paralyze governance. As Bertram argues, “The state can continue to act, but it must justify its actions in terms that appeal to the shared reason of citizens, to their public reason.” I take Bertram’s point to be relevant for the relationship between the public nature of the humanities (or at least the public context in which the humanities are evaluated) and how a defence of the humanities should fit with this framework. Although an appeal to liberal justification may not be necessary in grounding a public defence, Bertram’s point in emphasizing the principle of justification illustrates the democratic ground on which a public justification rests.

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23 Ibid., 31.
24 Ibid., 32.
25 Ibid., 30.
If the goal is to argue for public funding and support of the humanities, then this argument should consider and address the public itself.

1.2 Grounding a Public Conception: Education, Higher Education, and the Public

1.2.1 The Public

To argue for a public justification of the humanities first requires some elaboration on what a public is, and on the relationship of the public to its education systems. This discussion will help to establish what kind of value education has for the public, and the place which the humanities might occupy within this framework. I begin with an account of what the public is, how the identity of the public frames the understanding of public interests and goods, and of the processes by which those interests are advanced. I discuss the recognition of externalities (i.e., the indirect consequences of private actions, and the possibilities for collective action and deliberation to extend common interests) as a significant foundation for any sense of the public good. This approach draws largely on Dewey and Aristotle’s views to provide a picture of what a public is, and how it connects to education.

In *The Public and its Problems* (1954), John Dewey addresses an often-overlooked aspect of public education, namely how the public is constituted as a means of exploring the role of education as a public good. For Dewey, a public emerges when a group of individuals recognizes and acts collaboratively towards shared interests and aims. Such action presume, Dewey argues, “that human acts have consequences upon others, that some of these consequences are perceived,
and that their perception leads to subsequent effort to control action so as to secure some consequences and to avoid others."  

This awareness of actions and their consequences is the basis, not only for the formation of the public, but also for understanding why some kind of educational program that cultivates individuals (for collective action and for living communally) is a necessity for public life. Insofar as individuals act without recognition for the effects their actions on others, they tend to act and think in a private manner. It is only when individuals become conscious of the external effects of their private actions, and develop an awareness of something shared with others, that a public begins to emerge.  

This basis for the public is important, because for Dewey, an interest in shared ends is not just the foundation of the public, but also the reason why education, as a public-supported activity, is necessary at all.

Dewey identifies the recognition of external consequences as the seed of public interest. The indirect effects of private transactions, or *externalities*, bring attention to the common aims and interests shared by a group, thus transforming private transactions into collective issues. When an action performed by an individual, or between individuals, is confined to immediate consequences, that action is merely a private matter. That is, when the consequences of an action are confined to the direct participants, there is little to encourage a collective or external interest in that action. However, when an action produces consequences that affect those who are not

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participants in the original transaction, then these unintended external consequences turn the
transaction into a public affair. As Dewey explains,

consequences are of two kinds, those which affect the persons directly engaged in
a transaction, and those which affect others beyond those immediately concerned.
In this distinction we find the germ of the distinction between the private and the
public. When indirect consequences are recognized and there is effort to regulate
them, something having the traits of a state comes into existence.\textsuperscript{28}

For Dewey, it is precisely when we recognize the external and expansive effects of a
seemingly private transaction that we begin to perceive the grounding phenomenon of being tied
to one to another in a public sense. The recognition of indirect, yet shared, effects opens private
actions to collective consideration. A common fate that arises from the shared effect of
consequences is the grounding for a shared interest and for collective action. When we become
aware of the effects of our actions on one another, we may or may not choose to put this insight
into action. The fundamental point, however, is that this recognition is the basis for public
consciousness. The consciousness of shared objectives and outcomes can cause either conflict
between people or draw them together. The possibility arises, however, that different individuals
with different ambitions can be brought together towards united efforts and deliberations.

There are numerous examples of externalities that demonstrate how private transactions
can lead to external, or eventually, to public consequences. A notable example that illustrates
Dewey’s argument is Garrett Hardin’s (1968) article \textit{The Tragedy of the Commons}. In this piece,
Hardin responds to discussions of his time on the issues of population control. In particular, Hardin
is responding to calls for technical solutions to the issue of overpopulation, as opposed to collective

\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Ibid.}, 12.
or behavioural changes related to “human values and ideas of morality.”

Hardin argues that “most people who anguish over the population problem are trying to find a way to avoid the evils of overpopulation without relinquishing any of the privileges they now enjoy.”

Hardin’s charge in making this assertion is that a solely technical approach would misidentify both the cause of the problem and the possibility of its solution. The real problem, he argues, arises in large part from a way of thinking derived from an interpretation of Adam Smith’s “invisible hand,” which has led to the belief that “decisions reached individually will, in fact, be the best decisions for an entire society.”

To illustrate the fallacy of this reasoning, Hardin appeals to William Foster Lloyd’s (1794-1852) allegory of the tragedy of the commons, as described in 1833. Hardin summarizes Foster Lloyd’s contention as follows:

Picture a pasture open to all. It is to be expected that each herdsman will try to keep as many cattle as possible on the commons. Such an arrangement may work reasonably satisfactorily for centuries because tribal wars, poaching, and disease keep the numbers of both man and beast well below the carrying capacity of the land. Finally, however, comes the day of reckoning, that is, the day when the long-desired goal of social stability becomes a reality. At this point the inherent logic of the commons remorselessly generates tragedy.

In Foster Lloyd’s tragedy, the pasture is used by all with a focus on their own benefit—as would appear rational by classical accounts. Each of the cattle herders is concerned with the number of cattle that he or she can graze on the pasture, and they think of maximizing their own gains by

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30 Ibid., 1243.

31 Ibid., 1244.

considering, “What is the utility to me of adding one more animal to my herd?”\textsuperscript{33} The tragedy arises when this seemingly rational way of thinking, which may in fact produce individual gains, comes to make each individual worse off through the accumulated results of their joint actions. If each cattle herder considers the positive utility of adding one cow to his or her herd, then they have produced a clear increment in their personal benefit. At the same time, the consequence of the additional grazing by one extra animal to the individual herder appears less consequential in light of this calculation. Hardin explains:

Adding together the component partial utilities, the rational herdsman concludes that the only sensible course for him to pursue is to add another animal to his herd. And another; and another. ... But this is the conclusion reached by each and every rational herdsman sharing a commons. Therein is the tragedy. Each man is locked into a system that compels him to increase his herd without limit—in a world that is limited. Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons. Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all.\textsuperscript{34}

Hardin uses the tragedy of the commons to illustrate what for him is the misguidedness of population debates focused solely on technological innovation. For Hardin, the pastures, like the problem of overpopulation, demonstrate the paradox that is the relationship between a shared finite world and the rationality of infinite self-interest. The seemingly private action of each individual, working only towards his or her own good, can lead to significant consequences shared by all. More specifically, blindness to or refusal to acknowledge the global outcomes of individual actions, and the need to address common outcomes as such, perpetuates the consequences of these externalities.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 1244.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 1244.
Hardin’s account is in large part grounded in matters related to the commons—those resources which are shared yet finite. The account illustrates how individual actions can produce shared consequences. The finite nature of the resources we all depend on creates a kind of interdependence on each other’s behaviour and choices, which atomistic accounts of individualism fail to account for. When the commons are used with the belief that they can be treated on the basis of self-interest, with the support of a prevailing ideology of individual freedom, then massive problems can emerge—the solutions to which far exceed the control of any singular individual. Many environmental problems today illustrate this same phenomenon. Pollution, deforestation, urban sprawl, resource depletion such as overfishing, loss of biodiversity, and habitat destruction all serve as examples of the compounded effect of individual transactions. Environmental externalities are often spoken of today as environmental effects that are unaccounted for by economic calculations.

The idea here is that traditional economic cost-benefit models do not accurately represent the actual costs and benefits of our economic activities. For example, traditional manufacturing and sale calculations do not incorporate the potential costs to human health from use of toxic materials, or the environmental cost of the waste produced in the process. This view of externalities is mainly a response to how the environment and various other important factors—such as costs to health, happiness, and other social goods—tend to be ignored by conventional cost-benefit analyses. Such costs often have a more long-term or qualitative nature, and are thus less tangible when considered under a traditional model.

Today, climate change serves as a particularly strong example of the consequences of our isolated and narrow attitudes, not just as producers and consumers, but also as human beings who have responsibilities for our shared world and collective wellbeing. At the same time, the crisis of climate change demonstrates another important aspect of public thought, namely the possibility of
shared action following the recognition of common aims and interests. Not all externalities are negative, and not all collective action must be aimed at preventing negative externalities. An upside to the recognition of shared consequences is the possibility of forming common goals, and acting collectively towards positive social change. For example, universal healthcare and welfare systems, or other social safety nets, can emerge from pursuing the shared goals of equality and wellbeing. Pooling collective efforts and resources can, not only prevent negative outcomes that may affect society at large (such as the spread of disease, the many consequences of poverty, or the continuation of historical discrimination and inequality), but such shared efforts can also bring about the positive outcomes we envision. These changes can be big or small. A group can work together to build a community centre where everyone can have access to recreational and educational activities. Likewise, a group of countries can create bodies such as the United Nations, or coalitions to work towards global changes that no individual country could address alone.

The argument grounding these collective efforts is, that shared interests can create the possibility of cooperation, and that better consequences can be produced through collective action than would be possible individually. This awareness involves a recognition of interdependence and the possibility of cooperation. Again, when externalities or indirect consequences are recognized by the effects they have on the welfare of others, then private matters become the concern of those indirectly affected, and those concerns are opened to public consideration.35

So far, this discussion has indicated that a genuinely public approach requires some form of trade-off with private interests when negative externalities are involved. For example, the healthy members of a society may invest in public healthcare, despite their own lack of immediate

personal need for those services. Or, citizens may demand that wealthy individuals contribute to a welfare system for those facing a more precarious economic situation. These trade-offs are often accepted, because of the recognition that the shared costs of ignoring problems (such as a lack of disease control, high mortality rates, or the social consequences of poverty) outweigh the costs of investing in programs to prevent those negative outcomes. Such trade-offs are often necessary for achieving certain social aims, such as equality, wellbeing, and certain standards of living for everyone. Aims such as equality often demand that we invest, to various degrees, our individual resources. Such shared aims may require that we compromise our goals of maximizing private interests in order to remedy our collective problems. Here, ethical decision-making or judgment requires concern for all of the significantly affected interests—even when they diverge from our own immediate concerns. More generally, the public interest requires a balance between private short-term interests, and collective long-term goals.

1.2.2 Public Education

Despite the importance of external consequences to the evolution of public welfare, Dewey notes that it is not the consequences themselves that cause people’s responses to be public. Public action depends on the conscious observation of external consequences, and on viewing them as shared effects. The element of conscious and deliberate association is pertinent because, as Dewey notes, collective association and joint behaviour are not distinct attributes of a human public, but they are essential to almost all creatures in nature. What is relevant to the identity of a public is that individuals become publicly minded through recognition of the effects we have on

36 Ibid., 12.

37 Ibid., 22-24.
one another. A public is a conscious association—one that emerges when we recognize that we are not isolated from one another as individuals, or even as groups of individuals. Not only do our actions and decisions interact, but by paying attention to our interconnected existence, we can learn to work together in achieving shared aims and goods.

Walter Feinberg (2012) argues that a public (conceived of as a deliberative body interested in the advancement of a common good) has a reality greater than the sum of the individuals who compose it. For Feinberg, we become a public when we become systematic and active regarding not just shared outcomes, but also our shared goals and intentions. Over time, the more sophisticated we become as a public, the more we become aware of our shared interests—and the more we can pool our individual and collective efforts or resources towards the common good. In that case, cooperative projects can be designed and funded through means such as agreed-upon taxation. Such efforts fund libraries and community centres for children, public science research projects that test the effects of pollution on our supplies of fresh water sources or on public health. Society can organize a census to better understand the demographics and needs of the population. Perhaps the most important collective activity of all is the establishment of public schools to cultivate the ongoing organization and values of society. All of these examples illustrate how we can work collectively towards our shared needs and interests.

Dewey argues that the need for public education emerges from the need to inculcate the young into society. He notes that this justification is almost simplistic enough to be considered a truism, but he maintains that there is a good theoretical justification as well:

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So obvious, indeed, is the necessity of teaching and learning for the continued existence of a society that we may seem to be dwelling unduly on a truism. But justification is found in the fact that such emphasis is a means of getting us away from an unduly scholastic and formal notion of education. Schools are, indeed, one important method of the transmission which forms the dispositions of the immature; but it is only one means.\(^{39}\)

Dewey takes care to identify the distinction between education and formal education. He makes an effort to clarify, at least partly, the purposes and characteristics of public education. In its most basic form, Dewey conceives of education as a process of continuity and renewal:

> With the renewal of physical existence goes, in the case of human beings, the re-creation of beliefs, ideals, hopes, happiness, misery, and practices. The continuity of any experience, through renewing of the social group, is a literal fact. Education, in its broadest sense, is the means of this social continuity of life.\(^ {40}\)

The very process of living is education in this sense. However, the need for formal or public education emerges with an increasingly complex social system of evolving relations, values, and norms. That is, the need for a collective system of education is strengthened with the increasing complexity and sophistication of the public. As a community possessing shared narratives, customs, and methods of survival grows in complexity, so too evolves the collective breadth of acquired skills, knowledge, and customs. As social complexity intensifies, so too does the need for formal education increases.\(^ {41}\)

For Dewey, education is essential to the cultivation of the public, because just as interconnectedness is born of individual action, we are all unique individuals who desire, act, and reflect according to our individual conscience. With this in mind, Dewey notes that even as


\(^{40}\) *Ibid.*, 2.

individuals, our thoughts and volitions are not formed in isolation from one another, or from the wider environment. Our existence in the world is not solipsistic. Rather, the contents and inspirations of our persuasions are born from interaction and association with things that are external to the self. It is precisely for this reason that education plays a vital role in the development of a public sphere, composed of individuals who are conscientious of the intersection between their private affairs and those of others. In this spirit, the purpose of education is not the subjection of the individual to the social order, nor is it (in its public sense) meant as a wholly inward cultivation of the individual.

At the core of public education is the understanding that the foundation for public life, in its most basic form, is an emotional and intellectual recognition of shared interests and divergent yet interconnected desires. The evolution of the public into a political state is brought about by the development of awareness concerning the public. It requires that an extensive understanding concerning the scope and complexity of a shared fate be transformed into a process of deliberative control—whether this happens by inhibition or promotion. However, the public body remains the essence of the social and political community, despite the particular policies or modes of governance through which the public may express itself. It is for this reason that public education can be deemed indispensable to the ongoing cultivation of the public good.

The development of attitudes and dispositions essential to the maintenance and progress of society requires ever more sophisticated education of the young. However, as Dewey argues, such education cannot meaningfully take place through force or simple skills training. Rather, the socially beneficial outcome is attainable only through motivating the young to participate willingly.

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43 Ibid., 15
in activities, which represent (in the condensed educational environment) the activities and dilemmas of daily social life. Education must therefore take place in a social habitat, or an environment which naturally cultivates shared experiences and activities, and which encompasses the habits and attitudes of the wider society.\textsuperscript{44} What does this necessity imply for higher education?

When the public is regarded as a community, rather than a mere sum of arbitrary associations, individuals become both subjects and agents of deliberation, action, and value formation. They become “a deliberative body seeking to advance a common good.”\textsuperscript{45} This evolution of sociability and public activity is likewise Aristotle’s justification for public education. For Aristotle, education is identified as the essential process for the cultivation of virtue amongst the members of a polis. As he sees it, the purpose of education is to provide students with (in Feinberg’s words) the “disinterested dispositions and deliberative skills to engage in rational discussions about the overall well-being of the polis.”\textsuperscript{46}

Such an understanding of education is rooted in a deeper conception of the meaning and capacity of the public as a deliberate association. The public is seen as both an active agent of its own fate or identity, and as an intermediary between the wills and ambitions of its individual members. The public sphere acts as a “check on individual desires and evokes mutual reflection and a concern to harmonize the desires of different individuals and to harness them in a communal effort to define and achieve a common good.”\textsuperscript{47} Here, public engagement and education are essential in establishing cohesion, but the individuals who compose the public do not cease to be

\textsuperscript{44} Dewey, \textit{Democracy and Education}, 22.

\textsuperscript{45} Feinberg, "The Idea of a Public Education," 3.

\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Ibid}.

\textsuperscript{47} \textit{Ibid}.
individuals. The duty of education in this situation is not to promote self-sacrifice or to dull individual passion and uniqueness. Rather it is to enliven public values and public mindfulness concerning the interests and outcomes of the community’s members. It involves the cultivation of both individuality and community by instilling a public spirit.

If, as Dewey, Feinberg, and Aristotle argue, it is true that the “conflicting streams of social influence come to a single and conclusive issue only in personal consciousness and deed,” then public education (as a component of a broader public sphere) becomes ever more necessary in the regulation and direction of private wills. Education enables navigation towards a collective goal and the recognition of a common good. If it is also true that the individuals who compose a public retain their private beliefs and ambitions, then a setting for deliberation and consensus becomes increasingly necessary in the pursuit of meaningful public engagement. This duality of interests lends to the establishment the public sphere—a setting for the sharing and deliberation of private beliefs in tension with common values and differing concerns.

1.2.3 The University as a Public Institution

Austin Dacey (2008) argues for the importance of an intentional and active public sphere. For Dacey, the public sphere is the middle ground between the private and the institutional: “Between the private sphere—of personal property, preferences, and relationships—and the civil sphere—of state power and institutions—there is a public sphere.” The public sphere in this sense


is the place where we work to understand and deliberate about public concerns. This idea echoes Aristotle’s recognition of the need for a common place to educate members of the public towards common interests.\footnote{Feinberg, "The Idea of a Public Education," 4.}

The public sphere is composed of numerous associations and institutions, which work together to cultivate public goods and discourse. These various spaces work together to form, what Dacey characterizes as, a marketplace of ideas, where groups and individuals can “weigh and exchange each other’s reasons for what we think and do.”\footnote{Dacey, \textit{The Secular Conscience}, 17.} Like Dacey, Henry Giroux argues that there is a common thread between the diverse institutions that compose the public setting:

public spheres — those institutions such as public schools, churches, non-commercial public broadcasting, libraries, trade unions, and various voluntary institutions engage in dialogue, education, and learning — that address the relationship of the self to public life and social responsibility to the broader demands of citizenship, as well as provide a robust vehicle for public participation and democratic citizenship.\footnote{Henry A. Giroux, “Neoliberalism, Corporate Culture, and the Promise of Higher Education: The University as a Democratic Public Sphere,” \textit{Harvard Educational Review} 72, no. 4 (2002): 427-428.}

Within the public sphere, education is a central process for creating a diligent and active public ethos. In fact, the view of the public sphere that Dacey and Giroux put forth seems to complement Dewey’s views of public education. The understanding of the public sphere as a deliberative space, connecting private and public matters, tends to extend the goals of public education beyond child development, and toward creating a means for adult members of a public to co-exist and act as a community. This understanding of the public sphere—where public education is one of a variety of ways in which the aims and conditions of society are cultivated—
follows an Aristotelian tradition in which reflection upon individual beliefs and desires is both a condition and an objective of public life. As Feinberg explains, Aristotle calls us to consider that “what and how I desire in private may well influence my capacity to reflect on these desires in public.”

In accordance with these various views on public education and the public sphere, I propose to evaluate the university and the kinds of education it offers in terms of service to a public good. This conception of the university involves regarding higher education as a public good, not simply due the technical fact that universities are in large part publicly funded, but also due to the deeper philosophical reasons that ground the relationship between education and the public. This, of course, is not to say that the public university does not produce many private benefits as well. Nor that private universities (consider the examples of Harvard, Stanford, and many other American Ivy League institutions) don't produce important public benefits through the research they produce, and education they provide. The aim is rather to make a connection between the university and the project of public education more broadly, and in doing so, argue for a public value of higher education that is not reducible to the sum of private goods.

Anthony Appiah has argued that although the idea of the university is far from straightforward, it still includes the historical and philosophical understanding of academia as a home for the pursuit of knowledge and truth. More precisely, the university is fundamentally “a

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54 Ibid.

place where certain types of knowledge are pursued, produced, and shared,”56 and that this is performed “at a high level of abstraction and in a pointedly systemic and rigorous fashion.”57 Such rigor and attention to method characterize the university as a place of “higher” learning. Because of its emphasis on research and teaching, that goes beyond a reproduction of what is already known and applied, the university has historically been seen as engaged in a production of knowledge that is somehow more sophisticated or refined than one might get from so-called “lower” education.58

With respect to education, consideration of Dewey’s discussion about the relationship between increasing complexity and the need for formal education can help illustrate the public value of higher learning. The growth of knowledge, as well as means to search for it (i.e. different disciplines and modes of inquiry) brings about an increase in complexity, and with it, the need for formal training. While this consideration helps to illustrate why the activities of the university may be regarded as publicly beneficial—that is, they are the location for the pursuit and passing down of a concentrated form of scholarship—it does not necessarily follow that scholarship is performed in the service of the public good, nor that higher learning is accessible in a way that best serves the public. It does however illustrate some of the justification for why public resources are channelled to these institutions.

As Côté and Allahar argue, the understanding of the university as a robust location for the pursuit of scholarship is intimately connected to its position within the public sphere, where it is

56 Appiah, “Free Speech and the Aims of the University,” 145.
57 Ibid. 145.
regarded as an intellectual body in the service of the public good. As a public institution, the university is seen as a place for the inquiry and deliberation that is necessary to advance the intellectual and creative resources needed for serving and educating the public.\textsuperscript{59} Within this framework, the university itself is woven into the fabric of public affairs. The university, therefore, plays a different role than institutions of basic schooling. Universities can serve not only to educate students, but may also pursue research and inquiry on behalf of society. Such research advances scholarship within the university, and serves the broader interests of the public. Concerning academic freedom, Thomas L. Nancy notes that both the investment of resources in higher education, and the effort to create independent spaces that are conducive to open and unhindered inquiry, involve a reciprocal commitment from the university to the public: “higher education enjoys intellectual freedoms and autonomy granted by the state, and in turn, it appears to hold that while academics are provided this sphere to discover and create, they will at the same time concern themselves with genuine public matters.”\textsuperscript{60}

Despite the university’s history as an epistemic agent of the public sphere, there has recently been a prevalent institutional shift towards viewing education as a dynamic for the pursuit of economic goods. The gravitation of higher education towards commodification is a phenomenon that is representative of the wider corporate society, in which the university is embedded. In fact, we can see this gravitation not only in the policies of governments towards education and other social goods, but also in the shifting discourses surrounding the purpose and philosophy which grounds the pursuit of higher education for individuals. The implications of an

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 12.

\textsuperscript{60} Thomas L. Nancy, "The Politics of Academic Freedom," \textit{New Directions for Higher Education} 152 (2010), 85.
economic valuation of public education, including higher education at the university, will be the focus of the following chapter.
Chapter 2
Reconfiguration of Aims in Higher Education

The previous chapter provided a sketch of the public, and how it informs a philosophical understanding of public education and the university. The value, role, and composition of public education and the university are all contestable, lively topics today, much as they were at the time of Dewey. The place of the humanities is emblematic of these issues, which represent several modern tensions in the university as they change along with its public context. I would now like to take a more in-depth look at some of these tensions as they apply to higher education today. In particular, I will discuss how an emphasis on the university as an economic public good has created challenges for the humanities. I will also show some of the ways in which these changes conflict with the goals and purposes of public education.

I argue that a narrowly economic valuation of the humanities fails to properly appreciate their value to society, and that this means of valuation should be rejected as an improper metric for assessing the worth of such studies. More specifically, I locate this valuation problem in the narrowly instrumental way that economic values are espoused. That is to say, the question is not just the validity of economic values in education, but the narrow way in which they have been implemented. I will argue that narrow instrumentalism is in conflict with the diversity of values and goals that comprise public goods, particularly in relation to public education and the university. It should be noted that although this chapter is largely aimed at critiquing the view of education as a primarily economic good, it is not meant to suggest that economic considerations have no place in discussions of higher education. In the final chapter of this thesis, I will address the shortcomings of an approach to public education that ignores the very real economic conditions affecting both educational institutions and individual members of society.
2.1 Public Education as a Plurality of Ends

As outlined in the previous chapter, the public is a collective body, which emerges from joint recognition of shared consequences. The recognition of shared aims, in turn, allows for collective effort in pursuing positive ends and restricting unwanted consequences. In this sense, public education can be thought of as a public good, which is meant to prepare individuals to understand and participate in public life. This objective, I have argued, is likewise an important public aim of the university.

As David Labaree argues, however, the idea of public education has not developed in a linear or uniform fashion. Public education, at least in the United States, has been the product of the push and pull of multiple visions concerning the objectives of public education. Despite its foundation in the socialization of young members of society, public education is far from being homogenous in its values and aims. That is to say, public education is defined by a plurality of goals, which are often conflicting or incommensurable.\(^{61}\)

In particular, Labaree draws attention to the competition between public and private views on the value of public education, and illustrates that even the public perspective does not involve a uniform understanding on the purpose education. Labaree notes that public education in the United States has evolved from two historical views of what makes it valuable. The first view is that public education is a means to nation building, and that education is necessary for citizenship. Labaree calls this the *democratic citizenship* perspective.\(^{62}\) The second view is that education is

\(^{61}\) This point will elaborated on later in this chapter when I discuss Stein’s analysis of the conflicts between efficiency, choice, and equality.

Labaree calls this emphasis upon the economic benefits of public education the *social efficiency* view. Despite representing very different approaches, both of these concepts are grounded in a philosophy that regards education as a public good.

In the democratic citizenship view, public education is an essential social mechanism, grounded in the ideal of democratic participation in public life. According to this view, a “democratic society cannot persist unless it prepares all of its young with equal care to take on the full responsibilities of citizenship in a competent manner.”\(^63\) This aim arises from an understanding of our collective interdependence. Each person depends on the political competencies of the others, and is thus at the mercy of “collective judgment about the running of our society.”\(^64\) On the other hand, the social efficiency view regards schooling as the training mechanism for the workforce, and a preparation for participation in the economic structures of society. In other words, education is “a public good designed to prepare workers to fill structurally necessary market roles.”\(^65\) One of the most important distinctions between these views is that whereas democratic education is founded on a transformative and progressive understanding of society (even if only in theory), social efficiency coheres to an uncritical understanding of society, in which education prepares students for assimilation into an accepted order.\(^66\)

Although the two perspectives differ with regards to the theoretical foundation and outcome of education, they are alike in the important sense that both of them view education as a

\(^{63}\) *Ibid.*  
\(^{64}\) *Ibid.*  
\(^{65}\) *Ibid.*  
They both assume that although individuals may benefit from the successful pursuit of formal education, the primary purpose and aim of schooling is to serve the public good. In this way, education is intimately linked to the needs and interests of the public, and can be utilized to achieve collective goals such as social equality, democratic citizenship, and economic development. Both of these views stand in contrast to Labaree’s characterization of the social mobility view, which sees private outcomes as the primary objective of public education. More specifically, the social mobility view regards education as a means for ensuring one’s economic prospects and social position. Here, education is akin to a consumer good. The benefits that accrue from schooling are in the service of individual interests and pursuits. In that case, education “is a commodity, the only purpose of which is to provide individual students with a competitive advantage in the struggle for desirable social positions.”

The democratic and social efficiency conceptions that Labaree outlines are two broad categorizations, which illustrate some of the core tensions guiding thought and policy in education. Labaree’s analysis of the historical emphases on different outcomes of public education is pertinent in showing that the value of public education is neither singular nor universally agreed upon. Whether it be the encompassing tension between economic or cultural aims, or the more particular conflicts such as the tension between non-instrumental inquiry and the more vocational approaches focused on skill development, it would appear that the philosophies and goals for education are numerous and constantly evolving. This consideration is important, not only for understanding the

67 Labaree notes, “we are all considered equal (according to the rule of one person, one vote), but this political equality can be undermined if the social inequality of citizens grows too great.” “Public Goods, Private Goods,” p. 42.

history of public education and the ideological forces that influence its present state, but also for deliberation on the aims that will drive education in the future.

Likewise, the university is the subject of differing and competing ideals about its internal and public mission. Labaree illustrates how several of the broader values, which drive public education, also extend to higher education. Of course some aims of higher education are distinct from those of basic schooling, such as the emphasis on research, the higher pursuit of knowledge, and the greater autonomy of the students. Still, Labaree’s discussion applies to some of the competing views toward the public university that were touched upon at the end of the previous chapter.

2.2 Economic Values in the Public University

Like public education in general, the university has been subject to competing perspectives on its purpose and value with respect to economic, social, and individual aims. Tensions between different views of higher education as a public good hold an interesting place in the university, where there are many stakeholders and their aims are complexly intertwined. In one sense, the mission of the university is different from that of basic schooling, largely because the mandate of the university is to provide a setting for both teaching and for conducting research. Furthermore, public universities do not receive full financial support from governments, and they are thus faced with economic constraints that are less pertinent to basic-level public schools. The effects of these economic constraints are further amplified because they are the direct responsibility of the university and its administrators, rather than being handled by an arms-length delegation to trustees or a ministry. In addition to the internal complexity of the university, the students who attend it have their own highly diverse goals. These aims may likewise reflect of the attitudes of the wider public towards higher education.
Today, tensions between different views of public education are highly visible in discussions on the role of the public university. As numerous theorists have noted, economic values seem to drive much of the public discourse regarding education. In particular, economic values have become central to how we, as a society, think about both the public function of education and the private outcomes we anticipate. This emphasis on economic standards reflects the evolving relationship between higher education and society, and results, at least in part, from changing public values. At the same time, this changing attitude towards higher education can be seen as a reflection of a broader social trend toward viewing public goods in terms of their economic value, and the ways that this trend guides public discourse more generally.

Economic values have shaped the aims of the university in two important, yet differing, ways. The first way concerns the kinds of economic returns and results that the university is expected to produce. The second way concerns how the university itself is structured, and how it is expected to operate in accordance with economic values such as cost efficiency and profit. Both demonstrate how economic values have reconfigured education as a producer of economic goods, either for society as a whole, or for the individuals who pursue higher education. I discuss three main examples of how economic aims have shaped higher education, often in ways that come at the expense of other educational aims. These are 1) credentialism, or the way in which university degrees are seen in the light of their economic or vocational exchange value; 2) outputs, or the kinds of research and academic activities that universities are expected to pursue and the economic outputs these activities are expected to produce; and finally 3) administrative structure, or how

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69 See for example Stefan Collini, “What are Universities For?”, Côté and Allahar, “Lowering Higher Education,” and Henrey Grioux, “Neoliberalism’s war on Higher Education.” It would be very misguided, however, to say that this statement is true of the work of scholars and educators, or even the totality of public discourse regarding education. This assessment is more reflective of how education has been framed by policy-makers and administrators.
universities are structured with respect to decision making and organization, in line with the economic values they are expected to prioritize. It will be helpful to briefly outline these three examples and some of the conflicting aims they produce. I will then proceed to a more focused discussion of how the economic value of efficiency, is a particularly problematic measure of educational aims, due to the narrow instrumentalism it involves.

2.2.2 Output

The second way in which economic values have influenced higher education is through alignment between the university program and the needs or demands of industry, with respect to what should be taught, and for what reasons. This trend reflects a “public” interest in providing a practical justification for public investment in higher education. However, this approach entails a corporate modelling of higher education. The competition for public funds has led universities to increasingly seek the financial support from private investors, and to align themselves with the goals of these stakeholders. In turn, universities have become subject not just to public aims, but also to the private interests of industry. As Ahmed Bawa explains,

Governments use funding to shift the culture of universities so that they engage more fully with the market. In particular, there is a continuous pressure on them to broaden the base from which they draw resources—by increasing student fee income, by generating larger and larger levels of third-stream income, by increasing class sizes, by becoming more business-like, and by building research and development partnerships with the corporate sector. So the quest for efficiency and effectiveness and the requirement of increasing third-stream income drive these research institutions inexorably towards more corporatist approaches.70

Universities have seen shifts in both research and teaching as a result of this prevailing commercial attitude. Which disciplines or subjects are taught, and by whom they are taught, can be strongly

influenced by the funding directives of the university administrative bodies. Likewise, the question of which disciplines and research projects receive funding and support is increasingly considered in reference to economic measures. Regardless of whether these developments result from financial need, government policy, or entrepreneurialism, there has in many ways emerged a university-industrial complex. As a result, universities have grown beholden to the economic ideals and objectives of industry, and research or teaching directives are reconfigured to align with notions of productivity and economic worth. The marriage of the academy with industry, to alleviate its financial needs, has involved an increasingly strong demand that the university re-envision itself according to corporate philosophies. As Bawa notes, “the common but no less controversial development of strategic alliances between universities and these corporate entities sets up the enormously complex intertwining of two very different cultures.”

As a result, universities experience pressure from the governments and the corporations that invest in them to produce graduates whose skills and qualifications align with the needs of industry, and to conduct research that is useful in serving industrial needs. This expectation can produce additional pressure for universities to teach and invest in areas of research and study that are connected to current market demands. The emphasis, in that case, is to meet the needs and directives of industry, which can gain private benefits from public investment in the university. This focus on the economic results of higher education is perhaps best illustrated by the output expected of universities. STEM disciplines in particular have gained favour as a part of a broader alignment of higher education with both the demands of the private sector and the wider national economy:

71 Ibid., 490.
Paradoxically, the calls for democratization and transparency fed into the views of those who opposed the liberal arts and favoured vocationalism, a position that resonated well with governments, which are financially accountable to the public. As a result, more university funding began to be directed toward the STEM disciplines (i.e., science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), while fewer grants were channelled into the liberal arts disciplines.\(^{72}\)

These university-industry partnerships and the recent push towards STEM disciplines, both reflect the idea of the university as an institution that should produce internal and external streams of economic goods. Here, the university is likewise regarded as an institution, which should show its effectiveness and contribution through production of knowledge and technological innovation, and to do this as a means to justify future funding from industry and government. This set of priorities, of course, interweaves the public function of the university with the economic fabric of industrial and national goals.

### 2.2.1 Credentialism

Côté and Allahar note that historically, the university has been a place for the credentializing of the children of the elite.\(^ {73}\) Today however, higher education is moving towards a general increase in accessibility and democratization.\(^ {74}\) This shift can be seen as a positive step towards increasing equality and openness, but as Côté and Allahar point out, it also raises an important set of questions concerning the aims that a university ought to serve. As these authors argue, “the opening of universities to students from working class backgrounds, women and ethnic

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\(^{74}\) I say this generally, as it does not include all demographics equally.
minorities have all brought important advances in knowledge and the capacity of the universities to fulfil their public missions. Yet they have also brought ambiguity about just what those public missions are.\textsuperscript{75}

The move towards massification in higher education creates a juxtaposition between greater public access on the one hand, and a shift towards privatization and corporatization on the other. Increasing corporatization has come largely in response to government policies that restrict public spending on higher education, often in response to budgeting pressures. This tension is exacerbated by the fact that the restriction of public funds must be compensated for by the university itself, which often offsets at least part of the cost through increasing tuitions and other expenses the students must pay to attend university, thereby making the stakes of attending university higher.

Credentialism is a view that higher education (or education more generally) is a means for individuals to attain status and economic prosperity through the “credentials” they receive from education. This alignment of educational value with private benefit embodies a perspective of education as an individual good, wherein individuals are represented as consumers, and universities compete to sell a marketable good. Credentialism sees the task of education as providing students with the knowledge and skills they need to do well in their employment, and this concept is often associated with vocationalism or professional training. Here, the perceived good of education is seen as employability and the attainment of personal economic standing. A similar but less individualistic formulation of this idea treats the task of education as providing the

\textsuperscript{75} Côté and Allahar, \emph{Lowering Higher Education}, 19.
economic means for students to become productive members of society through their future economic contribution.

Although credentialism is not necessarily economic in focus, the correlation between credentials and economic return has been strengthened by an institutional focus on the marketability of credentials. Credentialism has emerged not just from the economic considerations of students and how they perceive the purpose of a university degree, but also in the way this purpose has been embraced by the university itself. As a result of financial challenges, universities have moved towards a more corporatized model, in which marketability is an important factor. This trend affects how universities themselves construe the benefits or reasons for attending their institutions. Pressure to prove their economic value as they compete for public resources has encouraged universities to market themselves as a means to attract students, and then utilize this marketability as a justification for government funding.76

One concern about this trend is that credentialism might perpetuate a narrow means-to-ends view of education. Under credentialism, education is seen primarily as a means to one’s own social and economic prosperity, rather than as a good in itself. For those concerned with the value of academic learning and the pursuit of knowledge as its own end, credentialism seems to involve a certain passivity towards the process of education, by which students view education as little more than a monetary transaction. As Côté and Allahar note, this view directly conflicts with more liberal concept that education is an end in itself, and a process that requires real engagement for realizing its educative and transformative power.77

76 Ibid., 87.
77 Ibid., 93.
2.2.3 Administrative Structure

Finally, economic aims shape higher education with respect to the internal structure of the university itself. These internal changes are, again, at least partly in response to the growing financial pressure on universities due to declining public funds, and calls for public accountability with respect to the tax dollars invested in the public university system. One of the responses to declines in public funding has been an embracing of corporate management principles in higher education.\(^{78}\) The shift towards corporate management has likewise been a product of the transfer of economic models and standards into education.

The economic re-structuring of the university’s internal governance takes two general forms. The first form is a rising prominence in the roles of administrators. An increasingly managerial approach means that a greater number of decisions are being made at the top administrative levels, rather than at the faculty governance level.\(^{79}\) Thus, the shift in governance involves a shift in university power relations, particularly between the faculty and a managerial class.\(^{80}\) This restructuring of governance is not neutral; it represents a change in the values governing the university. As Côté and Allahar argue, these changes often bring about “serious difficulties for the professors and students who are caught between the corporate interests and the university administration that increasingly thinks in terms of the bottom line (profits).”\(^{81}\)


\(^{80}\) *Ibid.*, 27.

The second aspect of change in the university structure involves the values that drive decision-making. As both a consequence of, and a reason for turning towards corporate management models, universities seem to be taking a more business-like approach to their operations. They increasingly focus on ideas such as cost-efficiency, productivity, and profit rather than some of the more traditional epistemological and social mandates of the university. This development is partly a response to growing ideological pressures from governments, policymakers and globalized institutions. University managers feel increasing pressure to have their institutions seen as effective and accountable in economic terms. Such changes in internal decision making represent changes in the university’s values. For example, an emphasis on cost-cutting and efficient use of resources has bolstered the use of adjuncts and contact faculty, reductions in tenured positions, larger class sizes, the use of online courses as a cost-cutting measure, greater workloads for professors, and a more generally business-oriented decision-making model.

A resulting concern is that the university has come to operate more as a business than as a cultural or educational space, which calls into question the university’s public mission. Such changes in internal structure and values are important, because they demonstrate that not only is education being directed towards economic ends, but also that economic frameworks have come to govern education and the ways we think about it. This shift affects not only how the community of the university organizes itself, but what kinds of aims and learning activities take precedence as a result of these shifting values.

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82 Henry A. Giroux, Neoliberalism’s War on Higher Education, 17. The Latin origin of the word “university” supports this idea, in deriving from universitas magistrorum et scholarium, roughly translated as a “community of teachers and scholars” (Côté and Allahar, Lowering Higher Education, 9).
2.3 Economic Aims and the Challenge of Narrow Instrumentalism

I would now like to turn to some of the more overarching challenges of economic instrumentalism in higher education. Specifically, I would like to focus on the ways in which economic values have led to narrow instrumentalism by discussing the effects of prioritizing economic efficiency. Although instrumentalism is not necessarily connected to economic ends, a particular concern connected to the dominance of economic frameworks is that they require education to become increasingly narrow and fixed, in terms of what and how it accomplishes its economic aims. The push towards efficiency illustrates how focusing too strongly on economic values can lead to a narrowing of the organization’s aims, as a direct result of following pre-existing, fixed objectives. The purpose of this next section will be to show how this overemphasis on economic aims has led to narrow instrumentalism. Before continuing to explore this issue, however, some clarification is required on the relationship between education and instrumentalism, and on what “narrow instrumentalism” means in this context. Although a full philosophical analysis of this matter is beyond the scope of this thesis, some cursory arguments will help clarify the intention of this section.

One particular concern about the shift toward a predominantly economic understanding of education is that it leads to narrow instrumentalization. Education can be appropriated as a tool for varying social ends, such as political and religious indoctrination, or other practical and ideological ends. On an individual level, education can act as a means for achieving or maintaining social status, or for attaining the necessary credentials for one’s pursuits. Of course not all forms of instrumentalism are necessarily undesirable or narrow. Education can be used as a tool towards generally agreed upon positive ends, such as social equality and democratic participation, or towards bettering one’s prospects and possibilities. The particular worry that emerges from the overemphasis on economic efficiency (and on economic aims in general) is that this emphasis
leads to both, narrow ends and a narrowing of the processes for achieving them. This narrowing of ends and means comes at the expense of other important values in education.

Instrumentalism, broadly defined, is a means-to-ends relationship in which something is used as an instrument for the attainment of an external end. The concept of narrow instrumentalism itself, relates to several important questions about the broader aims of instrumentalism in education. The most fundamental of these questions is whether education, when properly conceived, is a means to other social and individual ends, or whether education is an end in itself. That is, we consider whether all ends to which education is directed are forms of instrumentalism, or if there are ends that are definitional of education itself.

Kant’s philosophy of autonomy comes to mind when considering the normative implications of the distinction between means and ends. The second formulation of the Categorical Imperative states that persons are ends in themselves, and should never be treated as a mere means, or instruments towards another person’s ends. To treat people as means rather than ends in themselves is to undermine their autonomy and personhood. In the case of education, however, more needs to be said, because education is both theoretically and practically value-laden, both in terms of what ends it should serve, and in what constitutes its internal method and worth. Even neutral-seeming or self-evident accounts of education are connected to some ideal about its purpose or aim. This sense of a broader purpose blurs the boundary between instrument and internal worth—between education as a means, and education as an end in itself. Additionally, the location of higher education in the public sphere suggests a reciprocity that further blurs the boundaries between what is internal, and what is instrumental in education.

Some clarification, however, can be had when the means and ends are not seen as opposing, but as two sides of the same coin. In its most basic form, education is a means to some kind of value or goal—of becoming what we consider to be an educated person, and determining what
kind of worth we believe such a person has.\textsuperscript{83} This assumption does not imply that the process of education itself is merely a means, or value-less in itself. Education is, and should involve, many valuable methods and experiences, which lead the student toward whatever end education is directed to.\textsuperscript{84} Thus, a better way to frame the concern regarding the prevalence of economic aims is to question instrumentalism with respect to what ends it is applied, and in what ways.

Although an evaluation of the varying ends that govern higher education is beyond the purview of this thesis, I would like to propose that instrumentalism can be considered as overly narrow, and thus problematic, if it results in one of two consequences. The first is if an end is emphasized without regard for how it may negatively affect the educative process itself. The problem of narrow instrumentalism in this case, is that it disregards the internal value that the process of being educated may have. Even if education is pursued in the service of ends that may be defined as internal goals, this does not mean that the process of education is without value. This observation can help clarify one way in which instrumentalism can take a narrow form. If the end towards which education is directed distorts or undermines the educative process itself, then education becomes a mere means to that end, rather than an inherently worthwhile process. Regardless of the ends to which it is directed, education is a process, determined by its own structure, ends, and internal goods. Establishing a balance between education as an internally valuable process, as a tool for the achievement and cultivation of broader values, and a self-

\textsuperscript{83} This definition implies valuation of the knowledge, skills, dispositions that we associate with the educated person.

\textsuperscript{84} In addition, it seems strange to say that an outcome is valuable, but that the steps to achieving it are value-less. The process of education itself can be defined intrinsically valuable, but it is still an end, and the value judgment that it be regarded as an end in itself remains.
directed quest for fulfillment is an important matter to address, so that education does not lose its educative quality.

A second consequence of narrow instrumentalism can occur when its ends are either disconnected from one another, or the side-effects of the aims are disregarded. An approach to ends which disconnects them from the greater scheme of values or from other long-term goals can be considered narrow, insofar as it isolates ends from one another, and from the broader spectrum of values it operates in. The peripheralization of long-term ends in favour of short-term goals is particularly pertinent when we consider the effects of prioritizing efficiency in education. An overemphasis on efficiency is problematic because, as discussed at the beginning of the chapter, public education is composed of multiple and competing long-term and short-term aims. A narrow focus on efficiency can be systematically misleading when it focuses on one value without regard for other aims that may conflict with it. This is the concern that Stein articulates in arguing against overemphasis on the economic value of efficiency. Such overemphasis results in a misappropriation of efficiency, which describes a means-to-ends relationship as an end in itself, narrowly and falsely replacing the actual ends towards which a process is directed, and foreclosing the ability re-examine what the goals and values should be.

Efficiency is one of numerous economic values such as profit and productivity. However, efficiency seems to have particular importance due to the way it has shaped educational discourse, and how this value has come to redirect educational aims and initiatives. Callahan’s analysis mainly concerns the influence of industrialism on the public’s perception of education in the framework of an industrial society. According to this explanation, the present emphasis on economic measures reflects the prevalence of the industrialism in the 20th century. Stein argues that economic valuation, particularly with respect to efficiency, continues to play a prominent role in how we, as a society, value public goods and measure their worth.
In *Education and the Cult of Efficiency*, Callahan describes how the doctrine of efficiency has shaped educational policy and administration, as a part of the broader public emphasis on economic values. Callahan traces the focus on efficiency in education back to the rise of industrialism of the early 20th century. The focus on managerialism is explained as resulting from our societal adoption of economic values. This saturation of business-industrial values in society has had a direct effect on our concepts of government accountability, and in particular on the delivery of education to the American society. The logic of industrialism induced a push for a business-like structure to education, with growing pressure to produce practical and immediately useful educational outcomes. Following the turn of the 20th century, education was not only modeled after industry, but designed to meet the needs of industry. The absorption of economic aims in education and the mandate of efficiency have likewise expanded with the rise of post-industrial society. According to Stein, the post-industrial emphasis on efficiency has gained increasing relevance through the language of choice and accountability. Efficiency is deemed fundamental for maintaining of legitimacy in a post-state age of service management. Stein argues that efficiency today is still rooted in the influence of economic values in public discourse. However, for Stein, the language of efficiency is more about the value of choice as part of a free-market ideal than it is about efficiency itself. In a knowledge economy that values innovation and

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85 Raymond E. Callahan, *Education and the Cult of Efficiency: A Study of the Social Forces that Have Shaped the Administration of the Public Schools* (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1962), 13. Callahan’s work is explicitly focused on the history of educational administration in the United States. I do, however, believe this work is pertinent here as a narrative, along with the work of Janice Stein, who speaks from a Canadian context.


variety, state control over the delivery of public goods has been weakened, and the state must therefore legitimize itself through such appeals to efficiency.

In particular, Stein is concerned with how efficiency in a post-industrial society shapes both education and our collective understanding of public institutions, or the public good. Stein argues that although the concept of efficiency has been utilized in societies for centuries, it is today a driving economic ethos. In particular, efficiency has become highly pertinent to the discussion of public goods. States and public institutions are expected to produce public goods and distribute them with ever-greater efficiency. This pressure is reinforced by the rapid innovation and plurality of post-industrialism, which forces the state to compete with the market in delivering public goods. The market threatens to outperform the state, due to its ability to offer efficiency and choice, in response to competition and consumer demand. In a culture of choice, Stein argues that governments and public institutions are expected to become more efficient in order to maintain public trust and demonstrate their effectiveness. In this sense, the benchmark of efficiency as a measure and an objective can largely be attributed to the way in which market ideology has permeated the public discourse. Stemming from the economic demands of competition and efficiency in the market sphere, public goods and institutions have become subject to the same demands of efficiency as their market counterparts.  

For Stein, what is worrisome about the present priority on efficiency is the way in which this value is understood to direct private, and more importantly, public goals and standards. Properly understood, Stein argues, efficiency is “the best possible use of scarce resources to achieve a valued end.” Attention to efficiency is important in a world of finite resources, where

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88 Ibid., 8.
89 Ibid., 6.
citizens and governments must choose the best use of materials, labour, and energy towards their desired ends. Likewise, the expectation of efficiency can be an important aiding principle for enabling democratic communities to hold their leaders and officials accountable in managing public goods and services. For these reasons, Stein says that efficiency has an important place in the public conversation.

As Stein notes, however, efficiency is neither a straightforward nor a comprehensive standard. Although efficiency is an important consideration with respect to how to achieve our common ends, it says little about what the ends themselves should be.\textsuperscript{90} It is important to note that efficiency and effectiveness are not identical. When we ask whether something is efficient, we must first determine what end the question of efficiency is referring to. Without this important pre-text, the discourse of efficiency becomes misleading in its conflation of means and ends. Also, the answers need to determine not only whether something is efficient, but whether the said efficiency is effective at achieving a further end.\textsuperscript{91} What is particularly dangerous about the “cult” of efficiency is that efficiency has become less a means of achieving our goals than the end itself. In that case, the goal of efficiency tends to reduce the space for evaluating and deliberating goals in the public sphere.

Identifying efficiency as an end in itself is a misleading use of language. Efficiency tells us little about the values and aims it is directed to, which makes these aspects of the process internal and invisible. In reality,\textsuperscript{92} The language of efficiency thus leaves unchallenged the values that are

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 6.

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 70. I think there is also an important question of what is actually meant by efficiency, i.e., whether the terms of efficiency are economic, temporal, etc. It may be found that the term efficiency might be referring to narrow margins, i.e., something can be economically efficient, but not environmentally so.

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 6.
the foundations for our collective and private goals. This omission is problematic on numerous grounds. First, it displaces the conversations about values and ends which ground our actions and decisions, rendering them invisible, unchallenged, and worst of all, natural. This omission of ends and values is particularly significant in the case of public goods. An important tenet of democratic society is that the public has access to, can deliberate about, and make decisions about which values and ends the government and the citizens work towards. Stein’s concern is not only that the discourse of efficiency may guide us towards the wrong ends, but that efficiency can neutralize the important philosophical and ideological claims and complexities which have built up our systems of education in the past, and should continue to chart their future direction.

What Stein and Callahan’s discussions of efficiency illustrate is an understanding of public standards, and of success as dependent on measurable and discernible outcomes. With the growing dominance of efficiency in determining public standards, schools and universities have increasingly developed an instrumentalist approach to education. Efficiency requires evidence and verification of the outlined ends, which means that these ends must be rankable or measurable, in order to demonstrate efficiency in their attainment. That is to say, what is important is not simply that goals are achieved, but that they are achieved with efficiency. When efficiency is regarded as an end in itself, quantifiable and clear-cut strategies become necessary as measures of success, whereas open-endedness and unquantifiable ends are seen with increasing scepticism.

This emphasis on efficiency is a contributing factor to a focus on pre-determined ends. Efficiency also has a correlating appeal to quantification as proof that results are achieved, and that energy and resources have not been wasted in attaining them. Although the ends of instrumentalism are not always economic, they are still more often than not connected to economic ends, or shaped by them. That is to say, efficiency—particularly when used as an economic standard—often frames the attainment of ends via economic values.
As Stein’s critique demonstrates, efficiency and accountability are important considerations for cultivating public goods, but when they become ends in themselves, they overshadow and confuse the values and aims they intend to serve. Arguably, this is what has happened in higher education, as well as education more broadly. The discourse of efficiency has introduced an instrumentalist mindset, wherein educational initiatives are expected to bring about observable results in meeting pre-determined ends. On the other hand, open-endedness and un-quantifiable pursuits are associated with inefficiency. The move towards instrumentalism under these circumstances carries a host of challenges. In large part, these problems derive from “the persisting intellectual dominance of a narrow instrumental rationality with a distinctive economistic flavour in framing value discussions.”

The trend towards instrumentalism in higher education has been critiqued by Henry Giroux. He argues that current culture rests on neoliberal notions of privatization, commoditization, deregulation, and value systems that promote self-interest and a focus on private goods. As a result of these ideological shifts, higher education, as discussed earlier, has been driven in large part by economic rationality. In particular, profit, efficiency, and results-based policies have played a prominent role in how educational programs have been shaped at the various levels of schooling. These aims embody a largely instrumental approach, in which education is seen as being in the service of external, often economic ends.

Just as efficiency proves to be a problematic benchmark of public goods and values, so instrumentalism can also lead to incomplete or inconsistent results with respect to public

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education. This inadequacy comes into focus when we consider the kinds of values assigned to education, and the multiple ways that education is seen as a public good—ways that are often characteristically and necessarily open-ended and qualitative in value. As argued at the beginning of the chapter, there are multiple and differing values which guide higher education. An attempt to reduce such aims to those that produce immediate outcomes further narrows and hinders conversation on what the value of public education is, and ought to be.

A narrow conception of education, grounded solely in immediate outcomes and pre-existing ends, can easily result in short-term and short-sighted decisions. An approach that restricts education to narrow ends undermines not only other legitimate aims in education, but it may even undermine its own objectives. In education, as with other public goods, when we restrict ourselves to isolated aims, we foreclose the wider deliberations necessary for reflection and critical perspective. Consequently, even if the ends we work towards appear to accrue social and individual benefits—as they very well might—they will likely do so within a narrow context which may serve pre-determined ends, but does not account for the resulting internal side-effects or contradictions—the very phenomena that most affect the public.

This problem can be illustrated if we look back to the discussion of public education in Chapter One. The absence of space for open reflection and deliberation towards shared aims and effects leads to narrow instrumentalism. By eliminating room for deliberation of various interests and aims, and by omitting consideration for the internal and external consequences of our courses of action (including the effects of immediate ends on long-term goals) our various ends grow narrower and more isolated from one another. One major contradiction, which emerges, is that the
short-term nature of narrow instrumentality comes to work against its own ends. When we confine our focus to immediate interests, we can lose the conditions for assessing the effects of our goals—both internally and externally. This loss can cause our aims to become disjointed, under a false assumption of insularity and immunity to externalized issues. As outlined in Chapter One, the public emerges precisely from the recognition that there is little reason to assume a natural harmony between varying interests and actions. In fact, as is demonstrated by the expansive, ongoing debates about higher education itself, it is predictable that at least some of the varying aims and interests we share as individuals or as a society will produce unwanted externalities, or will come into competition, which will inevitably render them matters of public concern.

In addition to the inconsistencies that arise regarding ends themselves, the kind of narrow instrumentalism we have discussed is directly opposed to the goal of cultivating a strong public sphere through education. Lack of space for a critical and reflective framework works against the fostering of public deliberation about collective values, aims, and how these can be served by public education. This difficulty brings into focus Stein’s critique of efficiency. The over-emphasis on efficiency is problematic precisely because it eliminates the broader questions of values and aims that are necessary to determining public goods.

Dewey and Aristotle both saw public education as the vehicle by which we cultivate individuals for participation in public decision-making. A consequence of narrow instrumentalism in education is its restriction of society’s ability to identify problems and advocate for itself with regards to educational policies, thereby undermining the deliberative and participatory aspects of

95 Short-term, because the overall and long-term effects tend to be abstracted from the immediate, definable objectives.
education. As Giroux notes, educational agendas that focus on narrow economic objectives, rather than on the difficult work of cultivating individuals who can engage in the discourse of public values in the university, have led to a kind of social amnesia that erases critical thought, historical analysis, and broader systemic relations. This loss undermines the public role of higher education as a tool for the public. In other words, the public good includes social and political ends fostered by the development of “public spheres aimed at promoting the collective good, and protecting educational spheres that enable and deepen the knowledge, skills, and modes of agency necessary for a substantive democracy to flourish.”

In this way, a loss of public discourse and the aims of higher education is actually a loss of the public and its values. Both within society and within the university, the loss of deliberative space for the consideration of common aims, and for making connections between private interests ends up undermining the foundational goals that public education is meant to address. For this reason, the narrowing of aims in the university is a threat to meaningful public life. As Giroux explains, the instrumentalism of modern economic rationality “does the opposite of critical memory work by eliminating those public spheres where people learn to translate private troubles into public issues. That is, it [the loss of public discourse within education] breaks ‘the link between public agendas and private worries.’” As a result, problems and goals become isolated from the larger forces that constrain and shape choices and circumstance: “we alone become

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97 Ibid., 16.

98 Ibid., 16.

99 Ibid., 2.
responsible for the problems we confront when we can no longer conceive how larger forces control or constrain our choices and the lives we are destined to lead.”

2.4 Challenges to the Humanities

For Nussbaum, a short-term approach to education that neglects the cultivation of individuals and their relationship to their community is a disservice to the public ends of education:

Thirsty for national profit, nations, and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive. If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person’s suffering and achievements.

Nussbaum, like Giroux, is responding to what she believes to be the long-term goals of education that are undermined by a narrow focus on immediate economic objectives. Her main contention is how short-term economic objectives have come to undermine the arts and humanities as an essential part of education. Nussbaum’s worry is consistent with concerns raised in a larger body of literature, which has been written to defend the humanities in response to the economic and instrumental policies or attitudes that presently shape higher education. The pervasiveness and authority of these pressures has culminated in an unfavourable position for the humanities.

Summarizing rather concisely why so many humanities scholars feel a threat to their place within the academy, the authors of the Harvard report on the humanities explain:

Research has demonstrated that university disciplines must do at least one of three things to draw the support of university administrators. To be successful, the discipline must either (i) be devoted to the study of money; or (ii) be capable of

\[100\] Ibid., 3.

attracting serious research money; or (iii) demonstrably promise that its graduates will make significant amounts of money. The university study of the Humanities is thought to score zero on each count. The fact that Humanities enrolments are declining merely shows that departments are failing in the vocational marketplace.102

These structural pressures are exacerbated by public perceptions of value and accountability that fall into line with economic instrumentalism. It appears, at least with respect to how the discourse is often framed, that administrators and policymakers are simply acting in pursuit of what the public wants. When framed within the discourse of efficiency and responsible use of public resources, the public interest is often characterized as a demand for accountability and practical, *tangible* outcomes. Côté and Allahar argue that increasingly, “the public is calling for ‘relevance’ and ‘accountability,’ and the modernist scholar is being asked to provide compelling material justifications for his or her scholarship, especially in times of severe economic downturn.”103

This push for practical results represents a disconnect between the traditional university and the public perceptions of scholarship. At the same time, these attitudes are exacerbated by the individual outcomes expected from the attainment of a university degree—particularly when students regard their investment in a university education in terms of its economic exchange value. Private attitudes, combined with public expectations for the contributions of higher education institutions, form a perception of the university that reinforces and legitimizes the economic attitudes that drive policymakers and administrators. This view is characterized by Bertram as:

> a perception that the wider society conceives of the humanities as somehow useless or frivolous, an unnecessary luxury at a time of economic retrenchment and relative decline. According to this view, social resources should be diverted instead into


science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), since the future wealth and prosperity of nations depends on societies having enough people who are well educated and trained in those disciplines and who can contribute directly to economic growth.\textsuperscript{104}

In response to these challenges, humanities scholars and advocates have provided defences of the humanities that fall into two general camps. The first approach has been to argue against the claim that the humanities do not possess utility or offer economic benefit. The second has been to question the standards by which utility is assessed. Numerous theorists have argued that the humanities do in fact produce important instrumental benefits. The impact or utility of the arts and humanities has even been a special topic of the journal \textit{Arts and Humanities in Higher Education}.

In this edition, several authors discuss the impact value—often conceived as public value—of the humanities today.

Exemplifying the first approach, Alexander Beecroft argues that while undergraduate professional degrees frequently lead to relatively high starting salaries, they commonly result in relatively flat pay scales later on. On the other hand, graduates of humanities programs “may struggle more in the first few years after graduation, but in the long run they frequently find career paths with greater long-term growth potential.”\textsuperscript{105} The indications of such statistics are often taken to be associated with the kinds of skills those trained in the humanities are expected to acquire, such as often-cited critical thinking, communication skills, and other important leadership qualities. Some have even argued that the humanities—as a part of a liberal arts approach to

\textsuperscript{104} Bertram, “Defending the Humanities,” 26.

study—are the advantageous economic path for students today. For example, Lawrence Katz, as cited in the *New York Times*, argues:

*a broad liberal arts education is a key pathway to success in the 21st-century economy,… the economic return to pure technical skills has flattened, and the highest return now goes to those who combine soft skills— excellence at communicating and working with people—with technical skills.*

Likewise, it has been argued that humanities scholarship can easily be shown useful and impactful, both economically and culturally—once the particular definition of utility is negotiated to properly address the outcomes of the humanities.  

Olmos-Peñuela, Benneworth, and Castro-Martinez argue that the humanities do in fact contribute to socio-economic development, when considered in a cultural rather than a technological context:

*Humanities have a direct economic impact through the cultural sector, for example, representing 1.7% of total European Union employment … from the “productive interactions approach,” all claims concede that in certain ways, humanities research is “useful”; clear pathways can be traced from humanities researchers to users, and impact can be identified, whether in many small changes (such as in watching a TV programme: Toulmin, 2011), or a few big changes (policy makers who change their systems, thereby influencing a much wider public).*

These facts are important, because they challenge prevailing over-generalizations and simplifications in the economic discourse that the humanities are disciplines with no pragmatic contribution to public life. The empirical evidence provided further unsettles the rigid divisions made between the theoretical and the practical within this discourse. By showing that the

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108 Ibid., 73-74
humanities can and do have instrumental impact on those who pursue them, the assumptive notion that the humanities are frivolous and antithetical to the practical goals of the university and public in general is dispelled.\footnote{At least to some extent.} However, although these contentions help to re-shape how the humanities are perceived within economic and instrumental models, these accounts fail to re-define the standards of economic instrumentalism by which the humanities are measured. Arguably, this second task is unavoidable in light of the challenges to the economic model of valuation earlier discussed, especially if the interest is to provide a comprehensive public definition for the value of the humanities. Elenora Belfiorie articulates this worry when she writes

I would argue that the real problem on hand is that couching political discussions and negotiations around policy change crudely in terms of exquisitely economic benefits … and eagerly complying with dominant frames and government’s desires in order to make one’s argument more persuasive, are all pragmatic strategies that might or might not bear short-term fruit. In the long term, however, they are limiting, effect profound changes in the very nature of public discourse, and simply do not definitively resolve the justification issue. We have seen that socio-economic impact has so far failed to successfully “make the case” for arts funding and to provide a credible solution to the justification issue … the same outcome is likely for humanities research unless a sustained attempt is made to broaden the debate from impact to public value.\footnote{Eleonora Belfiore, “‘Impact’, ‘Value’ and ‘Bad Economics’: Making Sense of the Problem of Value in the Arts and Humanities,” \textit{Arts & Humanities in Higher Education} 14, no. 1 (2015), 103.}

The second response to the economic challenges to the humanities has been to show that the question of value is falsely construed under economic terms. Numerous scholars have argued that economic measures alone fail to properly reflect the real and full value of the humanities, and of the overall project of education itself. Many scholars have pointed out that an economic valuation and its resulting instrumentalism misrepresents, or worse, undermines the true aims of education—whether they be individual growth, social cultivation, or the pursuit of open-ended inquiry. The
next chapter will explore these different accounts more deeply, but it is important to note that they are all grounded in a rejection of the kind of value perimeters set by the present economic model. Although numerous authors have spoken to this issue, I emphasize the work of Belfiore whose focus is the relationship between narrow instrumentalism, the aims of public universities, and the value of the humanities.

Belfiore echoes Stein’s view that the pressure to provide quantified, direct evidence of accountability extends beyond the university setting, and that the pressures of instrumentalism reflect a genuine problem of distribution and prioritization, with respect to how the public organizes its resources:

These pressures are not limited to publicly subsidised arts and culture, of course, but need to be understood as the more general outcome of rising expectations of the range, quality and availability of public services somewhat out of step with public willingness to adequately finance those services through general taxation (Flinders, 2012). Present austerity measures, adopted in several countries across the West in response to the fallout of the global financial crisis, have only amplified the pressures and anxieties facing governments to justify public spending on anything.111 Belfiore’s argument is not against a publicly accessible or relevant justification of the humanities, but a criticism of how a narrow criterion has become accepted as the measure of public value.112 For Belfiore, the problem is that “impact,” which represents a subset of economic and pragmatic considerations, has become synonymous with public value itself, and thus the benchmark of the public value of the humanities.

111 Belfiore, “‘Impact', 'Value' and 'Bad Economics',” 96.

112 As exemplified by her rejection of intrinsic value claims: “a point worth clarifying is that what makes the impact rhetoric questionable, I would argue, is not its explicit rejection of equally questionable notions of ‘art for art’s sake…” (Belfiore, “‘Impact', 'Value' and 'Bad Economics',” 96)
Pointing to a similar debate regarding the cultural value of the arts, Belfiore argues that the discourse on impact has proven insufficient as a measure of justification, because of the conceptual error it falls into. Citing Helen Small’s taxonomy, Belfiore argues that the humanities have a similar pluralistic claim to value as the arts. One notable example is the contribution that humanities scholars have made through their engagement with the present discourse on value, which as Small argues, shows the worth of the humanities itself: “the humanities are valuable precisely because they question and problematize the kind of utilitarian logic expressed in the definition of impact … that is, ‘the prioritization of economic usefulness and the means of measuring it’.”

This, Belfiore argues, serves as one example of how the humanities engage meaningfully and make important contributions to public matters in a way which cannot be captured by the narrow impact rationale.

At the same time, Belfiore is careful to avoid equating a rejection of narrow instrumentalism with a rejection of public justification. This point is important, because it avoids an exaggerated rejection of the need for justification, while providing a thoughtful critique that remains mindful of the significance of public value. Discourse about impact is a useful starting point for discussing the public value of the humanities. Questions about the aims and roles of the humanities within higher education, and their relationship to the broader public sphere, are particularly important not just as a means of justification, but because the humanities can be somewhat elusive. In this way, “‘Impact’ is important precisely because its very flaws remind us

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113 Ibid., 97.
that there is a whole set of important (and appropriate) questions that do not always get the attention they deserve.”

Belfiore’s analysis ends with a conclusion that “there is more to value than impact,” and that “we risk focusing on the latter at the expense of a full understanding of the former.” This conclusion coheres with the arguments against narrow economic instrumentalism presented in this chapter, as well as with arguments provided thus far about the kinds of values that higher education should embody. The following chapter will focus on exploring the positive claims made for the humanities.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 100.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 98.}\]
Chapter 3
Defending the Humanities

In this chapter I will review three major defences of the humanities. Due to the breadth of literature on this matter, what follows is by no means a complete overview of the arguments made in favour of the humanities. Rather, I have selected three arguments that I see as having an important historical lineage and contemporary presence. It should also be noted that while I draw heavily at times on the arguments made by Helen Small in her book *The Value of the Humanities*, the task of my analysis diverges from Small’s valuable taxonomy. The main goal of what follows is to evaluate each defence with respect to public value. This aspect of the subject is also discussed by Small, but it is not central to her critique of the various defences she reviews. Furthermore, while the university is seen as having important commitments to both teaching and research, my discussion will mainly focus on the university’s mission with regards to the education of students.

3.1 The Subjective Defence of the Humanities

Subjective defences of the humanities rest on claims concerning the experiences of those who pursue them. These accounts place value on the intrinsic worth of the experience generated for the individual, often relying on an appeal to the objective value or goodness that these subjective arguments rest on. The subjective defence of the humanities focuses on the intellectual achievement, pleasure, and/or fulfillment that studies in the humanities can produce. This defence often rests on personal testimony based on individual experience. The humanities are justified on the grounds that their study produces valued experience for those who study them.

A notable contemporary argument from this position is put forth by Stanley Fish in *Will the Humanities Save Us?* Fish’s argument is rooted in scepticism toward attempts to justify the humanities by way of their uses or outcomes. He argues that “It is not the business of the
humanities to save us, no more than it is their business to bring revenue to a state or a university.”  

Fish doubts that the humanities can be justified by the outcomes of studying them. In fact, he rejects this method of evaluation all together. The perceived lack of utility that may be associated to the humanities does not concern Fish, at least with respect to articulating their value:

"To the question “of what use are the humanities?”, the only honest answer is none whatsoever. And it is an answer 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."

For Fish, the humanities cannot be justified. Their worth can only be articulated with respect to the value they have for those who pursue their study. Therefore, there is little reason to justify that the humanities should do something. In contesting that assumption, he asks, “What then do they do? 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.”

Fish’s confidence in the intrinsic worth of such pleasure suggests that his view is based on something more objective, which offers grounds for judgments about what kind of study or knowledge is valuable, rather than a simple judgment-free appeal to subjective valuation. The study of the humanities is deemed valuable in and of itself, because the humanities themselves are intrinsically valuable. In the past, this perspective often relied on a view that the humanities represent an accumulation of “great books” that have objective cultural and aesthetic value. The

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117 Ibid.

118 Ibid.
humanities are therefore claimed to represent an intrinsically higher or more valuable form of knowledge that plays an essential role in the university. As Côté and Allahar note, the historical context of the modern university has lent itself to an accepted Euro-centric view of scholarship in the humanities. The modern scholarship which emerged from transition between the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment and theology set the early stones of modern scholarship: “the scholarly quest to develop a more objective and detached view of the world that is free from prejudice, superstitions, and personal interest.”

They explain:

Modern scholars…looking through their ethnocentric eyes, the élites of the day saw their European literature, philosophy, art, and poetry as defining the classics, and in their Eurocentrism defined them as setting the global standard for culture and civilization. Theirs was a clear embrace of the ‘liberal arts,’ and for a long time their vision was largely unrivalled.

However, the appeal to personal testimony suggests that the claim being made is less empirical than anecdotal in nature. That is, the argument refers to an individual’s own experiences or beliefs about the humanities, rather than a comparative evaluation of what kinds of experiences—pleasurable or otherwise—are produced through such study. Clearly, a descriptive account of why a particular individual engages with the humanities is not in itself a satisfactorily normative account of why a person should engage with the humanities. This issue is illustrated by a simple philosophical problem: if a student claims that he or she does not enjoy the study of the humanities, does this mean that these subjects have no value? Is the value located in the individual’s subjective claim, or is there some kind of objective justification of the humanities which does not rely on personal experience? Alternatively, if something is good because it is pleasurable, in what way does this connect with public responsibility?


The subjective view omits concern for consequences to others, and is thus incomplete as a public account. Consideration for the positive and negative side-effects on others are neglected in this argument, which is problematic from a public perspective, because personal value cannot be equated with public value. It seems particularly difficult to justify the humanities on the grounds of personal pleasure or individual intellectual benefit if we also are claiming that they deserve public support. And this is especially the case when our society continues to face collective challenges in meeting basic needs under widespread conditions of austerity. Why, for instance, should the pleasure and intellectual achievements of a few scholars be prioritized over serving the basic needs of many other people? Why would investments in the humanities not be better spent for after-school recreational programs for children in low-income communities, or increased funding of universal healthcare measures? These are of course false dichotomies, but they do hint at the weakness of subjective arguments as public justifications.

These challenges are important because, as noted, the university exists in a relationship to the public, not least of all due to the public resources it receives. The personal is important to scholarship, and those who pursue academia—regardless of their discipline—often do so with a great sense of commitment to their study. Their personal passions may very well result in important public outcomes. However, as discussed, the university is supported publicly not because of the personal benefits that a few may derive from it, but because of the contribution that scholarship makes to the public, directly or indirectly. Although personal fulfillment may be an important dimension of learning, this alone is insufficient to pass the test of public value.

Despite these problems with the subjective defence of the humanities, one point we can take from this argument is that we should want students to value the humanities, or whatever inquiry they pursue, and to take pleasure in their educative experience. In other words, we should want students to feel the beauty in the poems they read, to genuinely care about the texts they
study, and to find satisfaction in their intellectual pursuits. Such pursuits can be worthwhile in their own right, not merely as “something they have to do” to pass a course or get a degree. Furthermore, we certainly want any educational effort to cultivate personal experiences of excellence, pleasure, and growth. Testimonies to the subjective value of the humanities can be instrumental in illustrating the experiential value of their study. But claims of subjective value should not be restricted to the humanities. Those in the sciences may report the same intellectual fulfillment and personal connection to their area of study as that which is attributed to the humanities. There is little reason to assume that the subjective value that some associate with the humanities cannot be claimed by any other discipline.

3.2 The Humanities and the Liberated Individual

The argument from liberty rests largely on ideas of what it is to be liberated, or what the ideal pursuits and activities of the liberated person would be. This type of defence echoes the subjective account insofar as it considers the value of the humanities to be intrinsic. However the two arguments differ with respect to the source of this value. Whereas the subjective account emphasizes the content value of the humanities, the liberal (or liberty-based) defence is concerned with the method of study that it attributes to the humanities. Here, the humanities are characterized by free and open inquiry. Under the liberal view, the virtue of free inquiry is the means and the end in one.

One notable contemporary defence of the humanities on these grounds is the argument put forth by Talbot Brewer. Brewer asserts that the current debate over the value of the humanities is emblematic of bigger questions over the identity of the university. Brewer’s account is written from an American context, where liberal arts colleges and the liberal arts model of education play important roles in shaping the country’s public and private university system. His discussion is
useful, especially because it is presented in response to wide-ranging economic pressures on higher education. Although Brewer does not place his main emphasis on the public role of the university, his discussion connects the humanities to the underlying philosophy of liberal education, which can be brought into conversation with the more pointed discussion of public values.

For Brewer, arguments concerning the humanities are at the heart of a broader discussion regarding liberal education. His account serves as a response to the economic arguments affecting higher education in general, and the particular bearing these arguments have on the humanities. Economic pressures call into question the mission of liberal study, and Brewer responds by challenging the instrumental model of education:

Liberal arts colleges and research universities are vulnerable to finding themselves in situations in which they must choose between filling their corridors with instructional activities that pay the bills yet secure the mere semblance of survival, or struggling to sustain the liberal arts mission even in the face of serious uncertainty about its financial viability.121

The impact of economic pressures is felt differently by the humanities than the sciences or professional fields of study because of a fundamental philosophical difference between these kinds of study. For Brewer, the value of the humanities is not practical or vocational, but an end in itself. Brewer argues that although professional and technological areas of study may also be challenged by economic pressures, they do not face a conceptual challenge from instrumental thinking, as they are themselves instrumental disciplines. The humanities, however, face a fundamental challenge to their validity when they are subjected to instrumental rationality. The liberal philosophy of education, in that case, seems to make no sense, because it views the knowledge of

121 Brewer, “The Coup that Failed.”
human experience as an end in itself, rather than an instrumental good. Under the presently prevailing instrumentalist framework, the humanities and the liberal arts are placed in tension with economic pressures, with an assumption that learning should serve instrumental and practical ends.\textsuperscript{122}

Responding to theorists who have sought to justify the humanities on economically instrumental grounds, Brewer maintains that the value of the humanities cannot be captured by a means-to-ends justification. He applies this argument, not just against economic instrumentalism, but also against Martha Nussbaum’s democratic defence of the humanities. Nussbaum asserts that the humanities are necessary as a means for the cultivation of democratic values. Brewer however, argues that any form of instrumentalism with respect to the humanities ignores the self-contained value they possess as ends in themselves. As Brewer summarizes this point,

\begin{quote}
If I ask myself why I recoil from the arguments canvassed above, it’s because they so thoroughly miss the appeal of the form of thought and life that I seek to share with my students. For me, its appeal has nothing to do with preparing my students for any preordained social role, whether in the market or the forum.\textsuperscript{123}
\end{quote}

For Brewer, the humanities are representative of the most valuable kind of thought—thought born from liberty. We can see the value of such thought that derives from freedom when we consider the Greek origins of its designation. The terms \textit{scholar} and \textit{school} find their etymology in the Greek expression for leisure: \textit{scholé}.\textsuperscript{124} The ancient Greek concept of leisure as \textit{scholé} refers to time and energy free from the constraints of need or labour.\textsuperscript{125} This concept of creative leisure,

\begin{flushright}
122 \textit{Ibid.}
123 \textit{Ibid.}
124 It should be noted that this is a rough translation.
125 \textit{Ibid.}
\end{flushright}
which underlies our present-day terms for school and scholarship, is in this sense far more important than idle, personal pleasure. *Scholé* is the necessary condition for free thought as an end in itself.

The importance of thought that is independent from the immediate needs of daily life is traceable to the writings of Aristotle, for whom freedom from the demands and occupations of survival are a precondition for the most valuable sorts of thought and action—those pursued as ends in themselves.\(^{126}\) For Aristotle, occupation with the demands of day-to-day life serves to keep our minds preoccupied with immediate considerations. Leisure on the other hand, allows for the possibility of free thought—“thought born of wonder and free to unfold in accordance with its own internal demands, rather than thought born of consciousness of lack or need.”\(^{127}\) *Scholé*, or leisure, is thus the condition for human thought and action to be an end in itself. In a state of leisure, human activity is its own end, “free to unfold in accordance with the demands of this internal telos rather than activities whose point lies in some conceptually separate state of affairs they are calculated to produce.”\(^{128}\)

Likewise for Brewer, the absence of practical constraint is necessary in education. An economic approach to education is problematic precisely because it challenges the condition for and the value of open-ended expression and inquiry. As Brewer explains, the grounding aspiration of the liberal arts is to “engage in activities that are worthwhile in themselves, activities that can

\(^{126}\) *Ibid.*

\(^{127}\) *Ibid.*

give point to remaining alive and healthy.”¹²⁹ For this reason, the liberal arts are explicitly open-ended rather than instrumental or technical. Education that aspires to cultivate the capacity to act and think in a way that is worthwhile in itself must recognize that the task of education is connected to the freedoms and abilities they afford. Liberal education, then, is meant to provide an avenue for identifying, refining, and pursuing those activities that are genuinely valuable in themselves, and which, in turn, cultivate our understanding and practice of freedom.¹³⁰

Brewer’s defence of the humanities builds on a lineage of liberal philosophy, which sees the aim of the university as the pursuit of knowledge as an end in itself. Henry Newman, in *The Idea of the University*, puts forward the view that “Knowledge is, not merely a means to something beyond it, or the preliminary of certain arts into which it naturally resolves, but an end sufficient to rest in and to pursue for its own sake.”¹³¹ The liberal arts have traditionally been focused on a broad course of study, which encompasses subjects and methods valuable in and of themselves, rather than as narrow or specialized courses for acquiring skills. The goal is to provide an education in those areas, which will be of continued value to the life of the free individual.

These ideas rest on a historic contrast between pure and practical knowledge. Such a division originated with the ancient Athenians, but it has continued to inform the distinctions between different kinds of study in the university. According to Cameron,

Liberal education goes with a certain largess in the style of life of teacher and taught; material cares are assumed to be, if not altogether banished, at least not to

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be too consuming; the life of liberal study is free of perpetual occupation with small tasks, with concern about means to unconsidered ends, that is, it is a life of leisure, though by no means a life of idleness.  

Consequently, liberal thought is deemed not only separate from, but superior to thought in the service of material needs. The liberal arts are explicitly open-ended rather than instrumental. They provide a meaningful space in our lives, and require their own ethos.

The humanities have been traditionally integral to the fabric of liberal thought, because of their capacity to deepen “virtually all of the activities of those who permit their psyches to be reshaped by sustained engagement in them.” Brewer, however, considers it important to clarify that his rejection of instrumental justification is not a rejection of positive side-effects that the humanities may, and do produce. Although Brewer believes that the real value of the humanities is inarticulable under the constraints of instrumental thought, he is articulate in refuting the proposition that they are useless:

But this is surely wrong. The humanities are, more accurately, a gateway to and instigator of a lifelong activity of free self-cultivation. The changes they provoke in us are not always for the happier, or the more remunerative, or the more civically engaged, but when things go passably well, these changes are for the deeper, the more reflective, and the more thoughtful. The humanities connect our lives with a human vocation that is different in kind from, and potentially more meaningful than, commerce or politics (though in the end the lines between these spheres can break down, and commercial and political activities can themselves be infused with, and made more meaningful by, the extra measure of understanding we might hope

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133 Hannah Arendt notes that the distinction made in ancient Greece between these two types of thought was a distinction between the eternal and mortal. Hannah Arendt. The Human Condition. Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1958. 17-21.

134 Brewer, “The Coup that Failed.”
to cultivate by our engagement with history, literature, the visual arts, philosophy, and the like).\textsuperscript{135}

This, again, echoes Newman, who points out the expansive effect that study of the humanities has on its students:

> general culture of mind is the best aid to professional and scientific study...and the man who has learned to think and to reason and to discriminate and to analyze...will not indeed at once be a lawyer, or a pleader, or an orator, or a statesman, or a physician...or a good landlord, or a man of business, or a soldier, or an engineer, or a chemist, or a geologist, or an antiquarian, but he will be placed in that state of intellect in which he can take up any one of the sciences or callings I have referred to, or any other for which he has a taste or special talent, with an ease, a grace, a versatility, and a success, to which another is a stranger. In this sense, then, mental culture is emphatically \textit{useful}.\textsuperscript{136}

Newman’s view can almost be seen as a precursor to the present instrumental arguments about the long-term professional and economic value of study in the humanities. However, it is important to note that both Brewer and Newman reject such outcomes as the proper measure of value for the humanities. In other words, what is important when considering the value of the humanities is not the side-effects of free, reflective thought, but free inquiry itself. What makes education in the humanities, and the liberal arts more generally valuable is their ability to enhance and cultivate an individual’s capacity to engage with such thought.

The central argument that can be levied against this view is that it rests on historical divisions, which inherently limit the public value and accessibility of liberal education today. Brewer’s view rests heavily on a liberal theory of knowledge, which is itself value-laden with respect to what does or does not constitute real knowledge. In particular, the division between leisure and necessity, which Brewer discusses, translates into a dualism between pure and practical

\textsuperscript{135} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{136} Newman, \textit{The Idea of a University}, 145.
knowledge. It is worthwhile to ask how this division affects the composition of higher education, and what its social implications may be.

Like Brewer and Newman, Dewey, traces our liberal ideals of knowledge to the philosophy of ancient Greece, but more importantly, he articulates how these ideals arise from ancient aristocratic ideals and social divisions, which in turn are reproduced in educational philosophy. Dewey takes care to note that the belief in different kinds of education is not merely a reflection of existing attitudes toward knowledge, but also a social reflection of the ancient Greek class structure. This structure was composed of workers and artisans who performed practical work, and an aristocratic class which controlled the working class, yet distinguished itself from it. The division between the aristocratic class of citizens and the working or artisan class reflected the practical division of labour between the two. Members of the aristocratic class lived in leisure as a result of their status and wealth, while the life of the labouring class was occupied with the day-to-day tasks of securing the means of survival. It was the produce of these working people, which enabled a leisurely life for the rest of society.

From this division of labour arose a perceived distinction between the kinds of education appropriate to each class. The aristocratic class laid claim to knowledge and learning of the highest form—superior to the grunt work of subsistence and production. The appropriate education of the labouring class involved the applied knowledge necessary for practical work. This division then rests not just on social class, but on the stark divide that has existed between the kinds of knowledge deemed relevant for the labouring class and the leisure class:

The separation of liberal education from professional and industrial education goes back to the time of the Greeks, and was formulated expressly on the basis of a division of classes into those who had to labor for a living and those who were relieved from this necessity...The latter class labored not only for its own subsistence, but also for the means which enabled the superior class to live without
personally engaging in occupations taking almost all the time and not of a nature to engage or reward intelligence.\textsuperscript{137}

This division between labour and leisure has brought about a dualism between “applied” and “pure” knowledge.\textsuperscript{138} The highest forms of knowledge have been identified with pure theorizing, motivated solely by the pleasure of intellectual engagement, and apart from all application and utility. Knowledge that is meant to enable useful skills and practical consequences continues to suffer the stigmas once attached to the classes for which it was meant—even if we no longer maintain the same class stigma or structure. This historical division, in turn, has produced a separation between free intellectual inquiry on the one hand, and practice-oriented vocational education on the other. Liberal education is regarded as the pursuit of wisdom and knowledge for its own sake. This assumption seems to suggest that the less this knowledge is concerned with practical affairs and the production of real-world outcomes, the more adequately it engages human intelligence.\textsuperscript{139}

This hierarchy of knowledge is represented in education today by the separation between liberal education and technical and vocational training. Traditionally, academics have been defenders of the liberal sort of learning. By this standard, theory for theory’s sake represents pure knowledge, and should be valued as an end in and of itself.\textsuperscript{140} However, the humanities have recently faced a shift wherein the practical elements of education are now favoured in this

\textsuperscript{137} Dewey, 	extit{Democracy and Education}, 251.

\textsuperscript{138} 	extit{Ibid.}, 229.

\textsuperscript{139} 	extit{Ibid.}, 253.

\textsuperscript{140} Again, it should be specified that not all academics necessarily think this way, or that if they do sympathize with knowledge as an end in itself, that they necessarily reject the practical value of their study, or that their views are identical to the particular accounts outlined.
hierarchy, as such knowledge serves as an instrument towards economic goods. Historically, instrumental knowledge was seen as merely a means in the service of other(s) ends—much like the lives of those workers for whom it was intended.

The consequences of this separation between practical and pure knowledge have had important consequences. Educationally, disciplines continue to be divided between the liberal arts, and the professional or vocational ones. Where the liberal arts were once esteemed as the highest and the most worthy intellectual pursuits, the opposite is true today. Those who advocate for profit and efficiency within education now characterize the liberal arts as irrelevant educational luxuries. And responding to this, Brewer makes a valuable point: All of us want to live a life that is worthwhile as end in itself, and education can make an important contribution towards this end. Few of us would choose a life solely occupied by survival and necessity. This point of Brewer’s has validity, but it remains unclear why this aim necessitates a division between liberal and professional education.

In fact, it can be argued that the continued overarching separation of the liberal arts from professional education challenges Brewer’s vision of higher education itself, particularly in the context of democratization in higher education. Brewer notes that his defence of liberal education suggests a role for the university as a polis apart. In this view, the academy runs parallel to everyday life. It provides the environment for intensified liberal thought, which can then be carried forward in the students’ subsequent life pursuits. As Brewer summarizes this argument,

> It’s said that college is not the real world, and in a sense I’m happy to affirm that. But I don’t see it as mere preparation for the things of real substance and value—

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141 Brewer himself supports this point, stating that “the moment has come when we can afford to democratize this life-enhancing form of education. If we opt instead to remake ourselves as a kind of commercial Sparta, whose educational system is geared primarily to the enhancement of economic productivity, we will leave future generations with a pillaged natural environment and a badly degraded cultural environment” (Brewer, “The Coup that Failed.”)
that’s not the mode of its remove from reality. I see it instead as a kind of polis apart, with a few permanent members and an ever-changing citizenry of youths. What happens in this polis, when it’s in good working order, is a kind of intensification of a form of reflective self-cultivation that can and ought to be a continuous life activity. It is the stuff of a good life, not some mere instrumental means. It can be intertwined with, and can deepen, almost any subsequent life activity (including many forms of work and political engagement)...Because the academy encourages an open-ended form of self-cultivation, and because it provides an important counterweight to an outlook on value that threatens to render us a monoculture, it can be defended in the name of liberal pluralism, and the liberal should not adopt standards of public argument that prevent us from bringing the value of the academy into view. It would be a devastating loss if we remade this parallel polis in accordance with the guiding values of the corporation.142

The problem, however, is that Brewer’s vision of a liberal arts education upholds the ancient ideals of leisure over practical necessity. And a defence of such ideals fails as a justification of public value, especially insofar as it fails to consider the conditions of the students’ lives. Greater access to higher education means that an ever-greater number of students from diverse social and economic backgrounds are pursuing higher learning. While liberal education has historically been reserved for elites, the move towards democratization brings a much greater diversity of students with a wider plurality of needs and interests. Many students today are highly concerned with their means of livelihood, both during, and after their pursuit of a university degree. That is to say, not all students value or benefit from a liberal study of the humanities in the same way, especially because of the pressing economic and practical needs they face.

Even if liberal education is itself democratized, Brewer’s argument for a polis apart assumes that students can afford additional years of leisure in a place apart from other practical concerns. Insofar as the liberal justification is based on the universal goodness of a liberal education and of the humanities themselves, the account falls short in its appeal to the public,

142 Brewer, “The Coup that Failed.”
because it assumes a condition which cannot, in fact, be universalized to the public. Students today come from a diversity of social and economic backgrounds, not from homogeneous elites. This environment increasingly challenges the ideas that intellectual and liberal aspiration should be divorced from economic and practical concerns, or that the continuation of these divisions in academia will best serve the goals of public education.

3.3 The Democratic Defence of the Humanities

Martha Nussbaum provides a defence of the humanities grounded explicitly in their educational value to the public. For Nussbaum, the humanities play an indispensable role in public education for a democratic society. This defence of the humanities builds on some of the ideas presented in the previous sections about what a liberal education is and how it shapes a democratic public. However, Nussbaum’s account is a decisively political perspective on how this contribution is made. Similarly for Small, thinking is a social or discursive process. Her approach therefore places a good deal of emphasis on social and public deliberation as an outcome of freedom and reflective thought. The main contrast between Nussbaum’s view and the previously discussed accounts is that Nussbaum’s defence specifically emphasizes the (political) effects of instruction in the humanities. Her view diverges from the traditional liberal defence of the humanities in the important sense that she provides an instrumental, highly political defence.

Like Brewer, Nussbaum traces the roots of liberal education to Greek antiquity, drawing from Socrates’ concept of the examined life, Aristotle’s notions of reflective citizenship, and from
Greek and Roman Stoic notions of a liberal education.\textsuperscript{143} For Nussbaum, a liberal education is one that “liberates the mind from the bondage of habit and custom, producing people who can function with sensitivity and alertness as citizens of the whole world.”\textsuperscript{144} However, for Nussbaum, the value of this liberated thought resides in how it shapes who we are and how we live with one another. This argument draws on an important aspect of Aristotle’s philosophy—a view of education as the basis for a deliberative polis.

At the core of Nussbaum’s argument is the belief that the education of individuals is central to public aims. This belief is an outgrowth of her previous work, in which she argues for education as the “cultivation of humanity.” However, her view of the cultivated individual is relational in nature. Individuals are shaped by external forces, but at the same time they have the power to influence the world in accordance with their beliefs and actions. We affect, and are affected by each others’ beliefs and actions. Thus, individual cultivation is also at the same time cultivation of the public. In particular, Nussbaum identifies a deep-seated relationship between the humanities and the cultivation of a democratic public.

Nussbaum argues that the humanities are indispensable precisely because they are the area of education through which democratic citizens are cultivated. While the humanities may not be economically profitable, they are indispensable to the reproduction of democratic societies. This is a noticeably different line of reasoning than the defence of the humanities outlined in the previous section. Nussbaum is arguing against economic instrumentalism in education, but her

\textsuperscript{143} Nussbaum, \textit{Cultivating Humanity}, 8.

\textsuperscript{144} \textit{Ibid.}, 8.
position does not rest on a full rejection of instrumentalism. In fact, she rejects the idea that the humanities are not meant as a means for improving society. Instead, she argues that the modern overemphasis on economic ends in education has displaced the more important aim of cultivating a democratic public.\textsuperscript{145}

To lose the humanities in the pursuit of economic and technological progress, Nussbaum argues, will result in a future where “nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person’s sufferings and achievements.”\textsuperscript{146}

Nussbaum’s defence of the humanities builds off of her idea of education as a process cultivating human potential. Education through the humanities is “a cultivation of the whole human being for the functions of citizenship and life generally.”\textsuperscript{147} This result cannot be achieved by the teaching of mere facts, theories, or techniques. There is, in other words, a human element of education, which is severely undermined by an exclusive focus on narrow economic ends.

Nussbaum emphasizes the tension between mere factual or technical approaches to education and its liberal aims by positing an important bond between the humanities and global citizenship:

Does global citizenship really require the humanities? It requires a lot of factual knowledge, and students might get this without a humanistic education...Responsible citizenship requires, however, a lot more: the ability to assess historical evidence, to use and think critically about economic principles, to assess accounts of social justice, to speak a foreign language, to appreciate the complexities of the major world religions. The factual part alone could be purveyed without the skills and techniques we have come to associate with the humanities.

\textsuperscript{145} Nussbaum, \textit{Not for Profit}, 2.

\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 2.

\textsuperscript{147} Nussbaum, \textit{Cultivating Humanity}, 9.
But a catalogue of facts, without the ability to assess them, or to understand how a narrative is assembled from evidence, is almost as bad as ignorance, since the pupil will not be able to distinguish ignorant stereotypes purveyed by politicians and cultural leaders from the truth, or bogus claims from valid ones.\textsuperscript{148}

The humanities provide the educative material and the intellectual environment for embarking on the critical yet constructive task of educating future members of society. Whether through literature, history, philosophy, theatre, the study of language, or culture and religion, the humanities and liberal arts are meant to cultivate our ability to think critically, to develop a deeper regard for ourselves, and to expand our capacity to empathize with the experiences and conditions of others.\textsuperscript{149} In effect, these disciplines are a participatory avenue through which we can experience, imagine, and interact with the lives and stories of others.\textsuperscript{150}

Nussbaum argues that an education structured for profit, which focuses on technical and vocational training for narrowly economic ends, neglects the humanism needed in cultivating citizens. Isolated and narrow aims fail to address the depths of human experience and human possibility. The humanities possess a value, which transcends the benefit of any pragmatic or immediate goal. These disciplines provide an educative experience, which invites us to refine our understanding of ourselves and to purposefully explore our relationships with others:

We do not automatically see another human being as spacious and deep, having thoughts, spiritual longings, and emotions. It is all too easy to see another person as just a body—which we might then think we can use for our ends, bad or good. It is an achievement to see a soul in that body, and this achievement is supported by

\textsuperscript{148} Nussbaum, \textit{Not for Profit}, 93-94.

\textsuperscript{149} \textit{Ibid.}, 7.

\textsuperscript{150} \textit{Ibid.}, 107.
poetry and the arts, which ask us to wonder about the inner world of that shape we see—and, too, to wonder about ourselves and our own depths.  

For Nussbaum, the Socratic method is illustrative of how the humanities foster an educative environment that works towards the cultivation of democratic citizens. The Socratic method is a process of open and critical dialogue or inquiry by and among individuals. The Socratic method, Nussbaum argues, is grounded in the idea that “Everyone needs examination, and all are equal in the face of the argument.” What is particularly valuable about Socratic self-examination is that it “uncovers the structure of each person’s position, in the process uncovering shared assumptions, points of intersection that can help fellow citizens progress to a shared conclusion.” For this reason, an educative approach modeled by this method serves as a pedagogy for public engagement, and for fostering individuals who can internalize the capacity for reason and reflection with respect to their own and others’ beliefs. Nussbaum considers this as a particularly feasible goal at the university level, where Socratic examination and critical thought can lead to an independent and increasingly sophisticated ability to think.

Socrates’ idea that “the unexamined life is not worth living” can be understood both within the context of the personal and of the polis—a “life of questioning is not just somewhat useful; it is an indispensable part of a worthwhile life for any person and any citizen.” Public participation

\[151\] Ibid., 102.
\[152\] Ibid., 51.
\[153\] Ibid., 51.
\[154\] Ibid., 55.
\[155\] Ibid., 21.
requires open and critical deliberation with our own ideas, and those of others. Without this, Nussbaum warns, the public sphere becomes a competing ground for self-interested beliefs and ideals, with little in the service of public association and collective thought. The sense of community is weakened if we conceive of public deliberation as a clash of opposing interests, but it is strengthened by an understanding of participation in the Socratic manner—as a process of deliberative judgment about the overall good which is open to critique and amendment.156 A public, which works through a deliberative and participatory model towards shared ends, cannot be conducted by individuals whose deliberative approach consists of speaking past one another, or of thinking solely according to prior biases and private interests. Rather, a democratic public is one, which “genuinely takes thought for the common good.”157

The Socratic methods follow from Socrates’ faith in the power of reason and the practice of self-examination to produce a good life. The ability to reason and reflect is significant for the public, as this ability is a deeply personal matter that affects how individuals engage with one another. The ability to reason is not a merely theoretical skill, but an ability that affects how we feel and act. In this way, a commitment to reason and deliberation makes people more likely to engage with one another in a thoughtful manner. In this way, an education focused on the cultivation of reflective and engaged thinkers produces individuals who are responsible for themselves, and whose thoughts and emotions become increasingly under their own control.158

For Nussbaum, a Socratic approach to education illustrates the relationship between the goals of cultivating individuals who can work together towards the common good, and fostering

156 Ibid., 27.


158 Ibid., 29-30.
each person’s capacities for thoughtful deliberation. The ability to cultivate these skills is at risk, however, when education becomes narrowly focused on economic objectives while ignoring the non-economic ends of education. Nussbaum does not object to the various other objectives for higher education that policymakers and administrators may consider. Rather, her argument is that these other objectives cannot replace the necessary objective of the humanities for sustaining a democratic public.

Nussbaum’s defence of the humanities has received a great deal of attention, and is often cited by scholars. At the same time, this publicity has invited numerous critiques of her viewpoint, including the critique from Brewer, who opposes the instrumental nature of her argument. Although some of these critiques have been or will be touched on in different chapters, I will use the remainder of this chapter to focus on what I take to be the strongest response to Nussbaum’s argument. In particular, I will focus on the critique outlined by Small, who builds on the arguments of Francis Mulhern to contest Nussbaum’s claims of a particular relationship between the humanities and democracy.

According to Small, Nussbaum’s view wrongly locates the democratic qualities of education in the humanities. Building heavily on the work of Francis Mulhern, Small challenges Nussbaum’s claim that democratic education and values are inherent to the humanities. Her critique rests largely on her anti-polemic approach to defending the humanities. Small is wary of arguments that claim too much, and of the often over-stated portrayals of the humanities that such arguments lead to. She believes that Nussbaum is guilty of just this kind of over-statement.

As noted previously, Nussbaum’s main argument is that a for-profit model of education fails to provide the educational environment necessary for cultivating democratic participation. For her, the essential requirements for a democratic society include “the ability to think critically; the ability to transcend local loyalties and to approach world problems as a “citizen of the world”;

and, finally, the ability to imagine sympathetically the predicament of another person.”

According to Nussbaum, these skills are cultivated through education in the humanities. Therefore, we cannot dispense with the humanities if we value democratic society.

Small sees Nussbaum’s argument as misguided, as the qualities of democratic education are not confined to the humanities. Rather, Small argues, the qualities identified as essential to the humanities define good inquiry in general. Inquiry, whether it is applied in the humanities or the sciences, fails the test of good scholarship if it lacks the open, imaginative, and critical qualities that Nussbaum defends. This argument concerning open inquiry builds on the views of Mulhern, who is in some ways sympathetic to Nussbaum’s account. Mulhern also recognizes that the humanities embody “in a concentrated form, certain resources of reason, certain reflexes of reason…without which universities no longer meet the historic standard that distinguishes them as a kind of educational and intellectual undertaking.” However, Mulhern rejects the idea that the qualities of democratic scholarship identified by Nussbaum are internal, or exclusive to the humanities, arguing instead they are definitive of good inquiry in general, i.e., “definitive of

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159 Nussbaum, Not for Profit, 7.

160 It should be noted that Nussbaum’s view is moderate in the sense that although she sees the humanities and the cultivation of democratic citizens as indispensable to the aims of higher education, she does not aim to exclude other functions of education: “the profit motive suggests to many concerned leaders that science and technology are of crucial importance for the future health of nations. We should have no objection to good scientific and technical education, and I shall not suggest that nations should stop trying to improve in this regard. My concern is that other abilities, equally crucial to the health of any democracy internally and to the creation of a decent world culture capable of constructively addressing the world’s most pressing problems.” Nussbaum, Not for Profit, 7.

161 Small, The Value of the Humanities, 148. I assume that Mulhern sees these qualities as concentrated in the humanities due to their interpretive nature.
intellectual work per se rather than the possession of any one domain of scholarship.”\textsuperscript{162} For Mulhern, the positive characteristics identified with humanities education and scholarship, are necessary for any discipline to be taught in a liberal rather than technical manner. As he argues, “these reflexes of reason are those without which no discipline can sustain a claim to contribute to a process of enlightenment; to engage in the critical and self-critical pursuit of knowledge, without which, rather, it settles for the status of vocational training.”\textsuperscript{163}

I take the point of Mulhern’s critique to be a kind of reductio ad absurdum of what education would look like without the educative qualities Nussbaum outlines, regardless of which discipline is being taught. All inquiry, whether in the humanities or the sciences, that lacks open, imaginative, and critical qualities, fails the test of good scholarship.\textsuperscript{164} This argument implies a rejection of the previously described division between liberal and technical disciplines. If that division is overcome, then the essence of liberal education lies in the approach to learning and inquiry, rather than in its subject.

The larger claim being made by Small is that Nussbaum is wrong in making a value claim for the humanities through her appeal to democracy. That the humanities involve important

\textsuperscript{162} Ibid., 147.

\textsuperscript{163} Francis Mulhern, \textit{Humanities and University Corporatism}, Podcast Audio, Backdoor Podcasting Company, November 5, 2010, http://backdoorbroadcasting.net/2010/11/francis-mulhern-humanities-and-university-corporatism/. Mulhern does not completely reject the democratic value of the humanities, arguing that “the connection between the humanities and democracy, then, rests not primarily on the claim that the humanities foster a distinctive knowledge content in those who study them, or even that they assist the development of particularly desirable psychological qualities, but that they teach in concentrated form the critical ‘processes’ of the wider democratic polity and in some measure they represent and model those processes.”

\textsuperscript{164} Small, \textit{The Value of the Humanities}, 143.
qualities that are emblematic of democratic values is not a definitional claim.\textsuperscript{165} Rather, it is a defence of their public value. This argument should start with defining the needs of a democratic society, and then consider the contribution that the humanities can make to it.\textsuperscript{166} Small’s scepticism toward the robustness of the democratic defence is evident. She questions an approach, which makes the needs of a democratic public secondary to the intrinsic contribution of the humanities, noting Mulhern’s observation that:

People who seek to defend the work of humanities departments…regularly invoke their ability to foster skills and values that are essential to a democratic society. In doing so they have tended to align themselves with an obviously desirable ethical comportment on the part of individuals and institutions in a way that confers easy benefit (one might add, easy esteem) on the speaker or institution but does little to identify the current needs of the democracy.\textsuperscript{167}

Small and Mulhern’s critique of Nussbaum demonstrates that although the humanities may have important public value by virtue of the contributions they can or might make to the cultivation of democratic values, this value is not distinctive to the humanities. If the aim is to provide a defence of the humanities on these grounds, then a more detailed argument is required about how the humanities contribute to the democratic project. A further note that can be made about the democratic quality of the humanities is that instruction in these disciplines is not automatically democratic in the way favoured by Nussbaum. Just as inquiry and learning in any field can, and

\textsuperscript{165} Brewer makes a similar claim, arguing that Nussbaum’s argument is not fixed on the importance of democratic education, but rather on the necessary value of the humanities: “Here’s what I think is driving Nussbaum’s argument. The fixed point is not the premise that we must provide whatever education will most effectively conduce to the vitality of our democracy. The fixed point is the eventual conclusion—that the humanities are valuable and must be defended against impending threats. The obvious line of defence is to articulate the value of the humanities as one experiences them. After all, it is precisely one’s lively sense of this value that inclines one to defend the humanities in the first place. But this direct argument is deemed inadmissible on liberal neutralitarian grounds—that is, because it turns on claims about the human good about which citizens can reasonably disagree” (Brewer, “The Coup that Failed.”)

\textsuperscript{166} Small, \textit{The Value of the Humanities}, 150.

\textsuperscript{167} \textit{Ibid.}, 142-143.
should possess democratic qualities, these qualities can likewise be absent in any educational setting. Democracy is neither definitional to the humanities with respect to content or to the method of instruction.

Although I agree that a defence of the humanities on the particular grounds of their democratic consequences fails as a defence of the humanities, I still think that this argument serves as an important defence of a publicly minded educational approach in general. What is valuable about Nussbaum’s defence of the humanities is best understood not as a defence of a particular field or subject, but as defence for an approach to education that conflicts with a narrowly instrumental objective. In what follows, I will revisit the main contributions and criticisms of the three defences outlined above, to inform my discussion of an ecological approach to the value of the humanities.
Chapter 4
Towards an Ecological Alternative

The previous chapter considered three arguments about the value of the humanities. All three were found to be problematic since the standards they use are, in one way or another, narrow or insular. A brief summary will help draw out the shortcoming of each argument. The subjective account ignores the issue of collective justification in appealing to individual pleasure and intellectual fulfillment. This basis for value in the humanities has limited merit, however, in that there is experiential value in the humanities, and the individual pleasures and fulfillments experienced through the humanities are important aspects of education.

The weight of this subjective account rests on more objective beliefs about the worthwhileness and superiority of the kind of individual pleasure and fulfillment which comes from the study of the humanities. This belief is meant, in turn, to justify the value of the humanities to those who pursue them as something that is self-evidently worthwhile, and without need for further justification. It is not clear, however, why the pleasures of a few should receive priority over the fulfillment or the basic needs of many other people. A strictly subjective account ignores the real world dilemmas and competing aims or values that we need to address on a public level.

The argument from liberty (or the liberal account) sees the humanities as essential for enabling independent thought. The humanities, in this view, represent liberated thought, which is claimed to be a good in itself. Traditionally, however, scholars in the humanities have assumed that the cultivation of free thought requires a state of leisure free from practical and material constraint. It has been argued that universities should be enabled to provide such an environment, because reflective and autonomous thinking is born out of the conditions of liberty, as opposed to conditions of service to utilitarian aims.
The difficulty with the liberal account is that the academic divisions on which it rests are embedded in social hierarchies that conflict with the democratization of higher education, by making them accessible to only a certain segment of the population, despite claiming universal value. Although this account may apply to an original vision of the university that serves a social elite, today’s greater access to higher education means that far more students from diverse social and economic backgrounds are pursuing higher learning. A view of liberal education which presumes the necessity for leisure divorced from practical concerns conflicts with the reality of the lives of many students today. This view is also out of step with the modern public’s natural desire that investment in higher education should yield pragmatic contributions to the individual, and to public life.

Finally, the democratic defence has presented the humanities as a necessary means of cultivating a democratic citizenry. Here it is claimed that the humanities are essential for cultivating democratic citizens who can imagine, empathize, and think critically. Therefore, although the humanities may not be economically useful, they are instrumental to the reproduction of democratic societies.

This defence considers how the humanities might provide a clear value to the public. However, the argument is undermined by its narrow claim that the democratic value of education is definitional to the humanities. In aiming to defend the humanities based on their democratic value, this approach identifies democratic qualities with the humanities, rather than seeing them as fostered, potentially, in any discipline.

Although these defences of the humanities each have some validity, they rely too much on distinguishing the humanities from other social concerns or forms of inquiry. As a result, they rely on problematic conceptions about the kinds of knowledge that are worthwhile, or that impute values too narrowly to the humanities alone.
In response to these challenges, I provide an alternative framework for thinking about the value of the humanities that is grounded in an ecological perspective of the university and its wider public. An ecological approach provides a strengthened yet pragmatic means of defending the humanities by appealing the value of the university for the public it serves. Use of an ecological perspective helps in answering questions about public value, while providing a more robust framework for drawing together arguments articulated by a number of theorists.

Ecology, or the study of how organisms are interrelated with one another in an environment, has served as a metaphor in various areas of philosophical study. In particular, it has been invoked in philosophy to challenge atomistic and mechanical ideas about human beings and the natural world. Ecological thinking addresses the relational and inter-connected nature of individuals, communities, and environments in a way that is often neglected in other approaches.

An ecological perspective is valuable because, as Lorraine Code argues, it provides an opportunity to re-think the “imaginaries” by which ideas and belief systems operate, beyond the particularities of their individual accounts. Code identifies imaginaries as the overarching images used in thinking about phenomena such as human thinking and action. Imaginaries, she explains, regard “often-implicit but nonetheless effective systems of images, meanings, metaphors, and interlocking explanations-expectations within which people, in specific time periods and


geographical-cultural climates, enact their knowledge and subjectivities and cast their self-understandings.”

My purpose in invoking an ecological metaphor is to suggest a re-imagining of the humanities that views them as situated and evolving like organisms in an ecological system. I consider two main aspects of how the humanities may be re-imagined. The first aspect situates the humanities in relation to other fields or disciplines in higher education. The second aspect is recognizing and fostering an interrelation between the humanities and other disciplinary bodies toward meeting the (public) aims of the university.

Much has been said in this thesis on the limits of narrow instrumentalism. Similar narrowness can also arise from values that concentrate too strongly on the intrinsic or “distinct” value of a field, without regard to its instrumental consequences. In other words, a claim of, “intrinsic value” falls short as an adequate public defence when it disregards how, why, and under what conditions something is valued.\textsuperscript{171} This isolating focus can lead to incoherence in relation to the fluidity of means, ends, and motivations that shape what we value. Without due consideration of the context in which something is considered to be “good,” the context of valuation is reduced rather than expanded. An account of the fixed “intrinsic” value that something has can in this way undermine the value it aims to define.

\textsuperscript{170} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{171} While I see these factors as calling into question the concept of intrinsic worth more generally, what has been pertinent to the present discussion is the specific ways in which the appeal falls short on account of public value.
Situating the humanities as a part of the intellectual ecology of the university, and the university itself as a part of the wider ecology of the society, can help to avoid the trap of being overly narrow in our way of defining or valuing the humanities. Positioning the humanities in a metaphorical ecosystem of human intellectual pursuits (none of which could properly function without the others) would be a significant step forward. Considering the value of science without the humanities, or the humanities without science is (as numerous theorists have argued) too restrictive. For example, philosophy has greatly benefited from and built upon empirical findings of the sciences. Although various intellectual fields may ask different questions, and use differing methods in answering them, there are important aims that are shared by most disciplines. The emphasis may vary by institution or discipline, but free, critical inquiry and the advancement of the common good through scholarship are shared objectives that all disciplines serve in different ways.

Accordingly, it is questionable whether the value of the humanities can be properly understood without connection to the aims and value of the university as a whole. To varying degrees, the defences reviewed above are embedded with beliefs about what the proper aims of higher education should be. I have argued, however, that in the past these aims have been either disconnected from the question of public values, or else disconnected from the conditions of the public. Such disconnections have prevented the public value of the humanities from being realized.

Furthermore, grounding the value of the humanities in the underlying aims of the university can help in resisting the negative effects of isolation and static essentialism. Instead, by viewing the humanities as an integral yet evolving set of questions, we may overcome perceptions that

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172 Code for example makes this charge against an over-emphasis on science, or scientism. *Ibid.*, 141
these disciplines serve narrow, increasingly irrelevant ends. Working inwards from the overall goals of the university for serving a changing society re-locates the humanities into an ecological framework involving the whole university and the wider public around it. Importantly, this approach connects the activities of the humanities to the endeavours being made in other fields of inquiry. Of course such awareness does not automatically cause these different academic communities to act on their relationality, but it can provide a framework to value and support such undertakings. Although the side-effects of certain problems may vary for different disciplines and different stakeholders, these differences do not negate the commonality of academic challenges. It may be illustrative to imagine the university as an academic ecosystem. Instead of being a series isolated disciplinary departments, the university is an academic environment of many bodies of knowledge, methods of inquiry, and areas of learning.173

So far, the academic ecosystem has been painted in terms of the ecosystem analogy’s positive attributes. However, natural ecosystems are actually driven by conditions of competition and scarcity. The collaborative conception of the academic ecosystem is thus a reflection of how the principles of ecology can inspire inter-connectedness, rather than serving as a perfect analogy.

The worst condition for the academic ecosystem is a case where disciplines operate in isolation, cut off from their symbiotic possibilities as a result of over-competition. When disciplines must compete with one another for resources, the aims of the university and the possibilities of cooperative inquiry are dissipated. Today, the university is an environment of scarcity, with a lack of public funds and public support, coupled with the enticement to competition

173 I have framed the ecosystem under these particular parameters here, but there are other ways the dynamics of the university can be characterized, such as with respect to students, scholars, and administrators.
for lucrative corporate support. These factors threaten the conditions for cooperation. Academics may construe this situation in such a way that they feel obligated to focus on distinguishing their individual merits when faced with these challenges. This response, however, is misguided.

When we consider the accomplishments of connections which have already been formed by different academic communities, we can see that we are all the poorer without formative connections and plurality. As Bertram notes, citing the example of medical humanities:

A[n] illustration of this complementary “hard” science and human experience is the emerging field of medical humanities, a group of related interdisciplinary fields of study linking the humanities … and their application to medicine. Their aim is to understand the relationship between medicine and these fields and to exploit the insights they can provide into medical education and practice. The medical humanities are an important complement to the enormous body of natural-scientific information that forms the major part of medical training. Obviously medical practitioners have to acquire and master that basic scientific knowledge, but they also work in what is primarily a person-centred discipline.\textsuperscript{174}

We can see the effectiveness of coordinated inquiry when we consider the many formative effects that various areas of inquiry have had on one another, and when we think about the possibilities for collaboration in the future. Again, this approach suggests that in relation to the wider public and the ecology of the whole university, there is value to understanding how different fields of inquiry contribute to each other’s efforts. Such awareness enables us to defend one another as important sites of inquiry and expression. In other words, we can hold together and demand that the ecosystem be protected.

The view I am suggesting involves seeing the humanities as an important way of thinking and as a body of knowledge alongside other constructed approaches.\textsuperscript{175} At the same time, however, this approach requires that those working in the humanities become more critically reflective

\textsuperscript{174} Bertram, “Defending the Humanities,” 46.

\textsuperscript{175} This is by no means a novel claim.
concerning their own practice, and how it connects to the needs and aims of both the university and of society more broadly. The rigid divisions between means and ends, intrinsic and instrumental value, and the nature of various disciplines, can all undermine our ability to properly deliberate and attain educational values.

An ecological approach to thinking about the humanities and the university as a whole involves moving away from a valuation that relies on essentializing or narrowly abstracting the humanities. Ecological thinking requires shifting to a focus on connecting the humanities to the common goals of the academic community, and in so doing strengthening the shared ethos between the humanities and other bodies of inquiry. The worth of all fields of inquiry is decidedly open and amendable, rather than fixed. An ecological approach, I believe, puts the humanities into a fresh and evolving context, rather than providing a fixed and neatly compartmentalized defence. This proposed approach responds to the narrow instrumentalism of present economic challenges, while resisting the trap of narrow essentialism.

I would like to conclude by identifying two benefits in re-imagining the value of the humanities ecologically. The first benefit is that an ecological approach better accounts for the specific question of public value. It does so by explicitly locating the value of the humanities in a public context, in terms of how they are connected to the values and aims of the university. By situating the question of their value in this way, we can better reflect on the practical considerations on which our answers rest. The challenge faced by the subjective and the liberal defences is that they either disregard or conflict with how their value claims unfold in a public context. If we return to the example of the liberal account, we see that although it presents the humanities as possessing public value because they cultivate reflective and autonomous thought, the conditions this account prescribes for this cultivation are inaccessible to many.
The condition of leisure assumed under the liberal model was, and continues to be inaccessible to vast segments of the public. When the university still served an elite minority, this exclusivity was not an important concern. However, with the increasing value placed on the democratization of higher education, the practical inaccessibly or unfeasibility of leisurely conditions produces a conflict in values. Again, it is difficult to justify public investment in a kind of enlightened education that can benefit only a few. Even if the university is made a polis apart, as Brewer suggests, and even if it is funded in such a way that more, or all students can attend, this solution still assumes that students can afford to invest their time in such a manner. Economic and social considerations, in addition to the cost of attending university, can significantly affect why education is pursued, especially if it requires extended periods of time.

As the condition of leisurely reflection is incongruent with the practical needs and constraints of many who pursue higher education, divorcing the humanities (and liberal education more generally) from practical outcomes can render the value these disciplines are meant to transfer inaccessible or irrelevant for many people. An ecological model, on the other hand, sees the condition of the public as instructive in shaping the value of higher education. In other words, the way a value is situated, and the conditions or consequences it brings about, are a part of the process of valuation. Admittedly, this kind of contextualization differs from a public defence of the humanities that is derived from intrinsic value. However, the example of the liberal defence illustrates the problem of separating values from the conditions in which they are applied. If an end is meant to be valuable in that it brings about a tangible good or effect, then the attainment of the end is contingent on how that end is pursued and cultivated. This is particularly important with respect to education because, as it has been argued, education is not directionless, but is always driven by some form of end in mind.
Amy Gutmann illustrates how educational values can be reconfigured to meet and reflect changing public needs. Gutmann notes that although the liberal arts are an integral form of education, their continued divorce from professional studies should be questioned due to the “less than intellectually ideal” outcome this divorce produces. Gutmann notes that the contemporary university has a strong orientation towards equipping students for their professional careers. Keeping the liberal arts as separate from these paths of study, she argues, is a disservice to the educative role they could otherwise play in students’ education. As she argues,

The problem with the strict separation between the liberal arts and subjects directly related to professional practice stems not from the fact that many liberal arts undergraduates plan to become professionals, but rather from the fact that all lives in societies will be profoundly shaped by the actions, attitudes, ethos, and ethics of the professions of law, medicine, nursing, business, engineering, and education, as well as the technological and trade disciplines less commonly found in the most selective institutions. Nonetheless, few undergraduates are taught to think deeply and systematically about the social roles and responsibilities of the professions and professionals. Just as teaching about politics helps to prepare students for thinking creatively about the role of politics in their lives and the life of their society and about how best to hold politicians accountable to serving the public, so too teaching about the ethics, history, politics, and sociology of the professions would help prepare students to think creatively about the role of the professions in society and how best to hold professionals publicly accountable.

Gutmann’s point is that the continued separation of the liberal and professional arts based on historical academic divisions (without reflection on how the value of their study may change, or how different sorts of implementation may be required) is a self-inflicted wound. As she notes in reflecting on the values often associated with the liberal arts and humanities, “But it is a


177 Ibid., 16.
mistake—judging by the ideal of intellectual creativity—to accept the conventional boundaries of a liberal arts education as fixed, rather than as a humanly alterable product of particular historical conditions.”

Gutmann’s critique of the liberal-professional divide leads nicely to the second benefit of the ecological model. Her argument is that a fixed approach to the boundaries and roles of different disciplines negatively effects both their educative value and their contributions to the intellectual ecology of the university. In this sense, the ecological perspective avoids the rigidity of absolute and static value claims. Instead, this approach suggests an emergent conception of how the humanities offer value.

Again, Gutmann’s critique of the separation between the liberal arts and professional study illustrates this point. Gutmann notes that “Today the broad area of professional ethics holds out enormous potential for intellectually enriching the liberal arts.” The ecological model enables such creative application because it does not seek to validate the humanities in isolation, but rather through their contributions to the broader project of academic inquiry. While the humanities have a set of characteristics (both in terms of content and method) that gives them some distinguishing features, an ecological approach avoids over-emphasizing them to the point that they appear wholly abstract and incommensurable from other ways of knowing. Furthermore, an ecological approach, in so far that it takes seriously the evolutionary aspect of ecology, requires that the characteristics of and connections between disciplines be fluid and emergent.

Bertram’s characterization of the value of the humanities exemplifies this model. While he notes that the humanities study certain aspects of human life that are not typically covered by the

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178 Ibid., 15.
179 Ibid.
sciences, he sees the value of this study in congruence with the value of the methods that the sciences employ. Bertram argues that this approach puts the humanities “under a protective canopy of a wider set of practices,” rather than isolating them. Here, the humanities are valuable because they are necessary to, and further academic inquiry. Bertram puts forth this position by arguing:

(a) the human world, the world of human experience, is a bona fide part of the world, to be equally considered as those parts of the world studied by the natural sciences, and (b) its study requires methods of understanding and interpretation developed by and characteristic of the humanities.

Bertram is cautious to note his divergence from a strong version of the justification he puts forth, in which the study of human experience is solely the project of the humanities. Rather, Bertram concludes,

that in psychology, sociology, economics, and other disciplines in the social sciences, there is surely a role for the observation of regularities, for experiment, and for new perspectives on our world that show how understanding of people can more fully inform us. A more moderate thesis seems in order, one that allows for the humanistic methods and those of the natural sciences to be complementary in understanding the human world.

It should be noted, in concluding, that an ecological approach situates the value of the humanities in the broader aims of the university, and considers how that value is shaped by the needs and conditions of the public. However this approach says little about what these value of these disciplines actually is for each situation. That is to say, the ecological approach lacks in

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180 Bertram, “Defending the Humanities,” 44.

181 Ibid., 45.

182 A stronger form of argument along these lines is that put forth by Michael Bérubé, who defends the utility of the humanities by arguing that the sciences cannot address questions of meaning in the way the way commonly done by the humanities. See Michael Bérubé “The Unity of the Arts and Humanities.” *Arts & Humanities in Higher Education* 2, no. 1 (2002): 23-40.

183 Bertram, “Defending the Humanities,” 45.
prescriptiveness with respect to what the value of the humanities is. Some perspectives on the role
the humanities can and do possess within the academic ecosystem has been discussed. However,
I conclude in a decidedly open-ended way, so as to leave open the questions of value. My aim,
rather, has been to provide a framework on which to approach the inquiry.
Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to re-conceptualize the public value of the humanities. In Chapter One, I positioned my emphasis on the public value of the humanities in higher education by discussing the roles of the public, of public education, and the interaction of these in forming a public conception of the university. In Chapter Two, I provided a discussion of how economic instrumentalism has reconfigured the aims of higher education, and of the challenge this has posed for the humanities. In Chapter Three, I summarized three influential accounts concerning the value of the humanities, and showed the shortcomings that each account faces with respect to the question of public value. In the final chapter, I argued for an alternative approach to assessing the public value of the humanities, as grounded in the imaginary of an ecological metaphor. Such an approach regards the public value of the humanities as situated within the aims and value of the university as a whole, and with respect to its public purpose. Furthermore, as others have argued, an ecological account necessitates a situated yet emergent approach to value. Drawing on the moral philosophy of John Dewey, I argued that the ends and means of higher education are evolving, and the humanities can have a valuable place within this dynamic conception of value.

My project has been to propose that we cannot define the humanities positively or essentially without running into conceptual or practical problems. Therefore, the value of the humanities is best positioned in connection to the broader aims and purposes of the whole university. This approach affords us the ability to critique the ways in which the value of the humanities—or of any other discipline or educative effort—may be compromised if they are based on faulty or narrow reasoning.

This account of the humanities may appear to offer a negative defence. However, as with the public value of the university more generally, the value of the humanities can change with the evolution of public needs and values. A situated and relational account of value suggests that
although we might run into problems in giving a positive account of value, the value of the humanities can still be defended through an appeal to their congruence with and contribution to the overall ecology of the university as it interacts with the public.

Of course this line of defence says little about what the aims and values of the university actually are. Some of its aims have been suggested with respect to the importance of the university within the public sphere, and in reference to the need for public education in preparing competent members of the public, especially in the context of an increasingly complex and democratized society. However, the ecological account that I propose requires an openness to diverse and changing values in higher education, in conversation with an evolving and changing public. The value of the humanities is in this sense open, not just to change, but to ongoing re-interpretation, a task at which they are known to do well.


