

## Applied Liberal Education: Making the Case or Muddying the Waters?

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Chris Martin's defense of liberal education, particularly in the context of preparation for the "moral professions," adds a valuable rationale for the importance of the humanities and liberal arts to the overall project of a university education. Martin carries out his defense by elucidating the value of a liberal approach to medical education that reveals and "More fully realizes the humanistic dimensions of more specialist professions such as medicine." In what follows I take a fairly contrarian line, so I want to emphasize that I sympathize with and find compelling Martin's argument for reconfiguring medical education to emphasize the centrality of humanistic concerns to the lives of medical professionals, rather than dabbling with a "quarantined" liberal education detached from practical or pedagogical issues. My concern is that, in framing his specific case for liberal medical education, Martin has conceded a particular conception of the nature and purpose of the university, which cripples the larger project of justifying liberal education. In particular, I argue that accepting and extending a set of distinctions regarding the value of liberal education undermines efforts to justify authentic liberal education, either within or outside medical education.

In laying the groundwork for his case, Martin rejects the strategy of appealing to the short-term, "instrumental value" of liberal education, such as its potential to contribute directly to economic growth or preparation for work. He cites Stanley Fish's contention that resorting to such practical claims is strategically unwise (because it may turn out that the humanities do not actually contribute in significant ways to economic prosperity, for instance) and fundamentally unsound (because practical benefit to society is not what the humanities are really all about). Fish's answer is to demand that liberal education be preserved for its inherent academic value as part of the guiding purpose of a university. This academic purpose is sharply delineated from any more mundane relevance of the humanities, be they economic or cultural (poetry readings and the like). This bifurcation between instrumental and academic outcomes of liberal education is the first distinction I wish to call into question.

Though he mentions several attempts to defend the basic concept of liberal education, Martin neglects to describe the substantive content of these efforts. Martha Nussbaum's classic account, for instance, identifies a number of concrete human capacities cultivated through liberal education that contribute to the development of democratic citizenship.<sup>1</sup> As she has argued in various contexts, these include a capacity for reflective, critical thinking, a sense of compassion for and understanding of other people, and an imaginative ability to view the world from diverse perspectives.<sup>2</sup> The key point here is that Nussbaum's approach places emphasis on both the academic and practical aspects of liberal education, without

conflating the two or reducing either to instrumental measures like economic growth.

While Martin questions Fish's reliance on the "academic value" argument, unlike Nussbaum he accepts the basic dichotomy at its root. The problem Martin sees with Fish's position is that it overlooks a third possible rationale for liberal education: a defense of its "educational value." In general terms, this purpose of liberal education is to "offer an initiation into forms of knowledge and understanding that are of intrinsic worth or value." Advanced in this way, however, the argument for educational value faces a dilemma parallel to the academic value argument: "because it is supposed to be dissociated from particular practical concerns we can't really demonstrate its value by showing how it can further economic aims or policy goals." In Martin's account, the force of the educational value argument is best conveyed in the context of specialized professional education, where it supplies an antidote to the dominant technocratic approach as well as the ineffectual alternative of dabbling in otherwise quarantined academic fields. This integrative approach to professional and liberal education is what Martin means by applied liberal education.

In my selective summary of Martin's argument, my aim has been to highlight a certain taxonomical approach to the defense of liberal education. In addition to the sharp line drawn by Fish between academic and instrumental value, Martin adds a third category, educational value, to the mix. Adding a layer of complexity, his analysis highlights a subcategory of educational value, manifested in applied liberal education. In directing our attention to specific contexts in which the humanities make a significant, even essential contribution to the value of education, I think Martin is following a worthy intuition. The enriched capacities enhanced by liberal education are, after all, embedded and embodied in the lived experiences of actual people, including the ordinary practices of professional life. So I applaud Martin's goal of "making sure that the meaning and values of the humanistic tradition are disclosed in the activity medical practice itself, not imposed on medical practice as if they were some foreign body." Furthermore, I agree with Martin that Peters is wrong to bracket medicine off from the liberal arts and classify it as a merely technical field. I suspect Martin would share with me the impulse to broaden the list of humanistic professions considerably (so that it includes law, business, and criminal justice, for instance).

And yet, this sense of affinity with Martin's central purpose is precisely what makes me uneasy with his means of advocating for a humanistic professional education. Modern technocratic society, and the professional specializations that accompany it, push us toward a compartmentalization of experience. Liberal education reminds us of our common humanity, placing the particulars of one's professional (or cultural, political, religious, sexual, and so on) identity within that larger context. I think Martin shares this conception of liberal education. However, by accepting a framework that sharply distinguishes between practical, academic, educational, and applied aims, he tacitly concedes a picture of liberal education that places it in a subordinate position relative to particular professions or fields of study.

Despite his best intentions, applied liberal education seems destined to be perceived as but one more element of whatever professional training houses it.

The case for liberal education need not be framed this way, and Fish's ivory tower retrenchment is not the only alternative. Though Martin's account of "educational value" is necessarily brief, it strikes me as precisely the sort of case made by Nussbaum and others. In other words, the educational value of the humanities and liberal arts *just is* their value. Viewed in this holistic sense, such a defense does not abandon efforts to preserve esoteric scholarly disciplines, nor does it view moral dimensions of the medical profession as marginal byproducts of her exposure to the humanities. Rather, it insists that these disparate activities are linked within a unified conception of what it means to be an educated person.

It is possible to interpret Martin's argument as largely strategic, and that might lead one to think that I have missed the point. According to this interpretation Martin makes his case within a particular context — medical education programs — where the idea of applied liberal education might have salience irrespective of the broader case for liberal education. In one sense, I acknowledge this point. Similarly, Fish makes his case for academic value in the context of protecting university departments facing cutbacks or dissolution. Different considerations must be brought to bear in specific circumstances. The next question, however, is what assumptions have been made, and concessions granted, along the way? Rather than accepting a bifurcated conception of liberal education, I have tried to suggest that we should pursue these efforts within a coherent, unified understanding of the nature and value of liberal education.

Whether the approach I suggest will succeed is, of course, highly uncertain. In its favor is the mutually supportive relationship among various aspects of liberal education. Furthermore, it shifts the discussion from a demand for instrumental justification of humanities to a reconsideration of the meaning of "social value." That question has relevance across the spectrum of university departments and society, including those that typically pursue a nakedly instrumental path. In business and management programs, for instance, concern about the recent consequences of corporate excess, and a growing recognition of the need for creative and critical thinkers have prompted at least some to reconsider the role of liberal education as a social good.<sup>3</sup> We should press this case, not shy away from it.

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1. Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

2. Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010).

3. See, for instance, Robert A. Giacalone, "A Transcendent Business Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," *Academy of Management Learning and Education* 3, no.4 (2004): 415–20; and Michael E. Porter and Mark R. Kramer, "Creating Shared Value," *Harvard Business Review* (January–February 2011): 63–77.