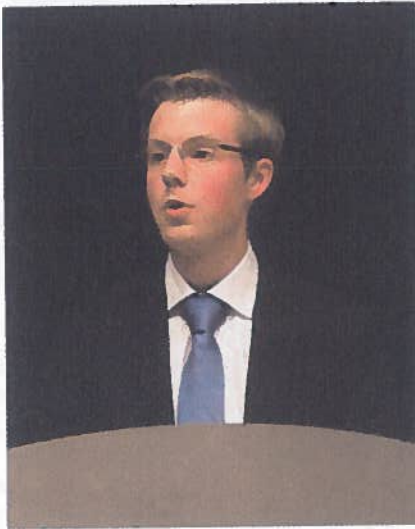


Terje Lohndal

ARE THE HUMANITIES USEFUL?



Dear President, members of the academy, distinguished guests, colleagues and friends,

In the recent movie about Margaret Thatcher, played by the outstanding actress Meryl Streep, there is a scene when Thatcher has to leave 10 Downing Street. Her employees present her with a gift, a radio. A touched Thatcher replies by saying «How useful!»

Usefulness has become the hallmark of academia. Funding agencies want to know how useful your research is going to be before they decide to fund it, and national research councils are increasingly

focused on the applicability of research. Research that leads to innovation, new medicines, new ways of producing food are all examples of the kind of research that enjoys a privileged status today when it comes to funding. Why? Because it is useful.

The disciplines that embrace usefulness are also enjoying another privilege: Students choose to study these subjects. There has been a change over the past few decades, and today students are encouraged constantly to think about what they want to *use* their education for. Education for the sake of education and insight is not «in», as my generation would say.

This trend is not particular to Norway or Europe. The President of Harvard University, Drew Faust, said in 2009 that we have seen «a steep decline in the percentage of students majoring in the liberal arts and sciences, and an accompanying increase in preprofessional undergraduate degrees». We should ask, as Faust does, whether universities have «become too captive to the immediate

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and worldly purpose they serve? Has the market model become the fundamental and defining identity of higher education?»

Where does this leave the humanities? Are the humanities useful? Does it even make sense to ask such a question?

A lot of work in the humanities is valuable in ways that are independent of utility, but this is no reason to run away from the question of what the humanities might be good for. Therefore I believe it makes sense to ask whether or not the humanities are useful, and that those of us who work within the humanities have an obligation to justify our existence. We have to explain to the world why what we do matters and why it has an intrinsic value. In this, our reach need not exceed our grasp, to modify a line from Robert Browning's poem *Andrea del Sarto*. It is not very hard to give a strong defense of the importance and usefulness of the humanities.

Martha Nussbaum, acclaimed professor of law and ethics at the University of Chicago, is one person who has done this, most recently in her 2010 book *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. The subtitle of the book reveals one of the most important reasons for why the humanities are useful: They create citizens who can foster a healthy democracy. A well-functioning society requires people who have the capacity to see the world from the viewpoint of other people (cf. Nussbaum 2010: 45).

The humanities are also central for what the Germans call *Bildung* and what we call *dannelse* in Norwegian. These are words that say something about how we want humans to act and think. They say something about our ability to think critically and to be what Nussbaum calls «global citizens». She lists the following skills when discussing global citizenship: 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 (Nussbaum 2010: 93). In short, the humanities teach us to question everything and to appreciate that the world is seldom black or white.

Our society needs these skills more than ever. Technology is affecting us in ways that no one could have predicted. Importantly, it affects human relations. Our cell phones make us available 24-7. Through Facebook and Twitter we can immediately tell the world what we are doing, and people can provide immediate feedback on what we post. These social media have also created new ways of using language. Blogs have created a new type of literature, in addition to making it possible for anyone who's competent at using computers to post whatever they want to post on the Internet.

We need to understand how technology is affecting us. For example, we need

to understand the use of language in social media. We need people to think critically about the consequences of how we use technology. When games and electronic communication replace human communication and interaction, we are clearly losing something. A scholar of the humanities will be able to study these issues and interpret them. We also need researchers to study the potential adversities of new technology, such as how it might be impacting our democracy in harmful ways. Such knowledge is extremely important, because it touches upon the fundamental parts of our lives: us, our interaction with others, and our participation in society.

In today's world we are bombarded with numbers. New technology has made it possible to create a poll for more or less everything. We are asked whether we are in favor of *x* or opposed to *y*. There is little room for argument or debate, for nuance or degree. The *grey zones* are absent. We need people to remind us that the world is rarely categorical. Simplifying somewhat, the humanities study the acategorical aspects of human nature. There is very rarely a given answer to a question. Of course, this is a general trait of good science, but it might be somewhat more characteristic of the humanities since we often study things that are harder to define categorically.

Although English does not have a word for *Bildung*, it does have another word which is hard to translate: *Liberal arts*. The liberal arts model is a staple of good American education, according to Nussbaum and many others. As Nussbaum (2010: 18) says, the American tradition of focusing on the active participation of the child «argues that education is not just about the passive assimilation of facts and cultural traditions, but about challenging the mind to become active, competent, and thoughtfully critical in a complex world». She reminds us that we find similar ideas in other cultures. In her book, she draws attention to the Indian Nobel Prize Laureate in Literature (1913), Rabindranath Tagore. The following quote (from Nussbaum 2010: 47) emphasizes the core philosophy of his school of thought: «Our mind does not gain true freedom by acquiring materials for knowledge and possessing other people's ideas but by forming its own standards of judgment and producing its own thoughts».

In the US, liberal arts education has shaped the lives of many people. Schools that offer such an education often attract generous philanthropic support from rich people who remember the great education they received when they could pursue issues open-endedly.

We need something similar in Europe and Norway, namely people who are willing to support the humanities, financially and in other ways. Today the humanities are challenged by the economic downturn and by the increased focus

on usefulness. I have argued that the humanities need to work on convincing us of the work we do. I have also argued that we need to fundraise. Universities need to contribute to the humanities. We need to put money for scholars into an endowment. The humanities have one huge advantage: work is cheap. Thus, we need to work often enough to fundraise. We need larger scale funding: we need to explore in Norway the possibility of replacement for public funding.

I want to return to the quote which I have quoted, about the value of education and the humanities.

Higher learning cannot be reduced to a vision absent from the world. It is about learning, understanding, and acting. We can afford to do it, whether we can afford to do it or not (Faust).

The humanities are not directly calculated. They are about critical citizens who care about the world. Everyone that is the case.

Thank you.

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on usefulness. I have already said that we need to work on convincing the public that the humanities *are* indeed useful and necessary. While we do that, we also need to work on convincing businesses and people who are well off to support the work we do. I believe we can learn a lot from how American universities fundraise. Universities need to show potential supporters how they can contribute to the humanities. Here are just a couple of possibilities. They can provide money for scholarships that can be awarded to great students, or they can put money into an endowment where scholars are able to apply for grants. The humanities have one huge advantage compared to the natural sciences: Most of our work is cheap. Thus we do not have to ask for millions. Smaller amounts are very often enough to fund a reasonably sized research project. Of course, we need larger scale funding as well, but fundraising is certainly an avenue that we have yet to explore in Norway and Europe. Needless to say, this is not intended as a replacement for public support, but rather as a valuable supplement.

I want to return to Harvard's president once more. In the same essay from which I have quoted, Faust also provides a strong defense of the intrinsic value of education and the humanities when she says:

Higher learning can offer individuals and societies a depth and breadth of vision absent from the inevitably myopic present. Human beings need meaning, understanding, and perspective as well as jobs. The question should not be whether we can afford to believe in such purposes in these times, but whether we can afford not to (Faust 2009).

The humanities *are* useful and necessary, even if their significance cannot be directly calculated. They create better human beings. They create educated and critical citizens who can make our global world a better place. Our job is to show everyone that is the case.

Thank you.

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