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Let's hear it for the humanities

A defense of dreaming and wondering
in an age obsessed with doing

HENDERSON, Ky.

I TEACH English and philosophy at a small community college. Sometimes when asked what I teach, I simply answer, "English." Without fail, I get an oral response. Usually I hear: "Well, I never did like English," or "Oh, guess I gotta watch my grammar around you." When I answer that question with "Philosophy" all I get is a narrow-eyed squinty stare and a "Hummmnn." Nearly always the spoken response to "I'm a philosophy teacher" is "Funny, you don't look like one."

Probably no behavioral scientist will consider those remarks hard data, but I am convinced that most people — regardless of how often they toss the term "philosophy" around in their talk — really don't know what philosophy is or what philosophers do.

Out here in Middle America (where you very nearly have to be "born-again" to get a Visa card), most people seem to believe that philosophy is a waste of time, that it has no practical application to daily problems, that the people who engage in it are spacey-pointy-headed intellectuals who go around with their feet three yards off the earth, or, worse yet, that it is dangerous. Many condemn philosophy, believing that it allows "licentious liberals" to spread "wicked secular humanism," which is propounded to be categorically opposed to eating apple pie, celebrating Mother's Day, singing "Stars and Stripes Forever," and restricting sex to hetero-horizontal orientations.

These widespread misconceptions are not only depressing but also frightening. Philosophy, the core of the humanities, the Queen of the Sciences — the womb from which all intellectuality begins — is being maligned as if she were a disgraceful hussy, an unfit mother.

Defining "philosophy" and "humanities" is no small task. But philosophy has to do with loving wisdom (not knowledge), and the humanities (as the term suggests) have to do with being human. Simply, the humanities are those courses — literature, art, music, philosophy, history — that help us to become more fully human; to develop those characteristics — imagination, reason, reflection, language — that set man apart from other living beings. They all have to do with learning the art of living as opposed to learning the art of making a living. (I am not berating those courses that teach how to make a living; I like to eat, too.)

MOST of my knowledge about these myths comes firsthand from students. At registra-

tion each year, I sit surrounded by my colleagues who, like magnets, attract throngs of students to their "money-making" skills courses. While they busily assign students to such "salable" classes as business, economics, education, shorthand, typing, etc., I grit my teeth, heave my chest, and sit idly by.

Doing my best to retain my professorial dignity after I have signed a bright-eyed freshman for the required Comp 101 and after having suggested another course, I smother a scream and quietly ask: "What do you mean your mother doesn't want you to take philosophy, that she fears it will undermine your faith and values, corrupt your morals, and thrust you into the company of weirdos? Doesn't she know that many of the great philosophers throughout the ages have been sincerely religious people? Ever heard of St. Augustine? St. Thomas Aquinas? He's a superstar. Then there is Descartes, a devout French Roman Catholic, and there's Kant, a devout German Pietist, and there's Kierkegaard, a devout Danish Christian existentialist. There are also Martin Buber, a devout Jew, and Gabriel Marcel, a devout French Christian existentialist, and there's Barth, and Bonheffer." Need I go on and on?

Wondering if God exists didn't undermine their faith; why should it undermine yours? What kind of faith do you have anyway that cannot stand up under examination, I think, as she gathers her cards and moves merrily on to the Figure Improvement teacher.

Questioning, dreaming, wondering are purely human activities that need stimulation and nurturing. For many, an exchange of ideas in a college philosophy class is the only opportunity even to initiate such activities and to learn something about becoming an inde-

pendent thinker. Wondering what there is beyond the sky, why evil seems to triumph so often over good, why little children suffer, why we are the way we are, what the world is made of and how it all got started, what is good and how do we find it, what happens to us when we die — these are all questions that seem impossible to avoid. How can anyone live in this world and not wonder?

Another misconception that boggles my mind is: "Gee, philosophy? I don't know if I can handle that. That's for smart kids." But they do not mean those "smart" kids who make A's in calculus and physics. Oh, no, they mean those "space cadets" who commune with the nether world.

Well, philosophy *is* for smart kids, the kind that get turned on with ideas and learning. Philosophy draws out what is deep inside a person. It demands serious thinking, and thinking is hard work. Philosophy calls for a critical examination of accepted old views and of not-yet-accepted new ones. It requires logical analysis, relevant facts, consistency in reasoning, clear definition of terms, and exact expression of ideas. Most scientists are closet philosophers, as were and are many mathematicians. Descartes invented analytical geometry, and Leibniz, along with Newton, infinitesimal calculus.

Actually, philosophy requires all the skills it takes to be really good at anything — business, teaching, engineering, writing. The thing is, philosophy puts an emphasis on asking questions, on examining a problem from all sides, not on accumulating piles of facts, or spewing out quick answers.

Then there are those who say that philosophy is a waste of time, that its subject matter is irrelevant and vague. They are light years from the truth.

The fact is that nearly 3,000 years ago in Greece, where Western thought began, all knowledge fell under the province of philosophy. Those old Greeks, rigorously curious, daringly questioned everything. In their search to understand the universe and man's place in it, they started all the independent disciplines as we know them today.

Anthropology, physics, biology, history, astronomy, mathematics, psychology, religion — literally everything fell under philosophy's domain. Then, as information accumulated in each area, individual specialities organized, broke away and became studies in their own right. As recently as the turn of the century, some courses such as biology and physics were still being listed in university curricula as natural philosophy.

But the worse myth of all is that philosophy is dangerous. Sheer balderdash! Those authoritarian forces who berate "secular humanism" for being dangerous are themselves dangerous. This country was founded by people who were seeking freedom of mind, spirit, and body. Our founding fathers, greatly influenced by such champion philosophers of individual liberty as Locke, Rousseau, and Voltaire, took unsparing pains to design the Constitution so that natural rights of individuals were protected.

Read your history to learn that most of the atrocities, unmitigated evils, committed throughout the ages have not been committed by humanists, but by those all fired-up with so-called "religious" zeal. Thousands of men, women, and children have been tortured and slain under the exhortation "It's God's Will."

IMPASSIONED preaching by so-called religionists has aroused people to frenzied

enthusiasm for killing each other for "holy" causes. Read about the Crusades, the Holy Wars, the Thirty Years War, the Siege of Constantinople, the Spanish Inquisition, the Protestant Reformation, the witch hunts, the persecution of the Huguenots, the Quakers, the Mormons, and so on. Read how hundreds of perhaps the best minds of the times were persecuted because they questioned matters of faith and dogma. Galileo was forced to drop to his knees and renounce his "false doctrine that the sun is the center point of the universe and that the earth revolves around it."

Look what has happened today in Iran when a religious fanatic rules.

A 17th-century mathematician, *philosopher*, and devout Jansenist, Blaise Pascal (who was about as strait-laced as one can get) explained it succinctly when he wrote: "Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from a religious conviction." But, ah, about all that those fired-up with the philosophy of humanism can be accused of is placing reason over superstition, knowledge over ignorance, individual liberty over state, personal conduct over ritual, and tolerance over tyranny.

Before the end of this century, we are going to have to come to grips with a multiplicity of thorny problems such as the scarcity of fuel on the world market, the military protection of this country, and the allocation of scarce medical resources. Just maybe "in these times that try men's souls" when technology and commercialism have created more problems than they have solved, an emphasis on philosophy is just what is needed. □

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