



NO COUNTRY FOR OLD HUMANITIES

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The American Academy of Arts and Sciences wants to know what people think about the humanities. So they asked them — and the results were promising.

Described as “the first nationally representative survey dedicated to understanding Americans’ engagement with and attitudes towards the humanities,” the academy asked just over five-thousand people “what they believe the humanities contribute to the American experience” and how often they “engage in different humanities activities.”

One of the major findings was that 85% of Americans responded favorably to the term *humanities*. Moreover, most of the adults surveyed wished they had taken more humanities courses in school and believe that “the humanities confer personal, societal, and economic benefits.” There was also strong support for teaching humanities in the schools.

In short, the overall conclusion from this survey is that Americans have a favorable impression of the humanities and support humanities education. So why then has the number of undergraduate majors in the humanities been in steep decline in the United States since the 2008 financial crisis? Many departments have seen their enrollment decrease in excess of fifty percent with the average decline in the neighborhood of twenty-five to thirty percent from its peak.

There are several major lines of argument that have been put forward regarding this decrease.

The first, and perhaps most often stated one, is the *Taxi-Driver Argument*: majoring in the humanities jeopardizes your annual salary and job prospects. Therefore, if you want a job with a good salary, stay clear of a humanities major. But this is a myth. While the median salary of those with a bachelor’s degree in the humanities is about five thousand dollars less than those with any other type of bachelor’s degree, by their mid-50s, humanities majors are employed at similar rates to those who studied in the professional and pre-professional fields — and make *more* money on average. Nevertheless, the perception that the opposite is the case persists — especially among those who did not major in the humanities.

Another is the *Welfare-State Argument*: the rise in student debt and the decrease in state and federal funding for higher education has led to declining interest in majoring in the humanities. But if this were the case, would it not also lead to a decrease across the board in university majors? While the defunding of higher education and the passing along of the cost to students is accurate, there is no reason to believe that it should disproportionately affect humanities majors. Unless, of course, the Welfare-State Argument is combined with the Taxi-Driver Argument, which, of course, it usually is.

The final one is the *Culture-Wars Argument*: there has been fifty years of warring waged against academe in general and the humanities in particular that has resulted in a decline of interest in majoring in the humanities. But if this were true, then why did the American Academy of Arts and Sciences find that Americans overwhelmingly respond favorably to the term *humanities*, and that most wish they had taken more humanities courses and believe that the humanities confer personal, societal, and *economic* benefits? Does this mean that the humanities *won* the Culture Wars for the hearts and minds of Americans?

What this academy survey reveals is something quite different about the humanities than the standard narrative of their demise and decline. Namely, that the aftermath of the Culture Wars was *not* the devaluation of the humanities, but rather their *reevaluation*. For example, we know that one of the consequences of the Culture Wars was the reinvention and reevaluation of the American Canon. Why can’t the same be claimed for the humanities? And is this perhaps part of the reason for their public favor today despite claims of their demise from within the academy? Let’s see.



When the roots of humanism are traced back to ancient Greece, its starting point is the thought of a man who travelled from city to city for forty years offering instruction for a fee. When he visited Athens, his great reputation preceded him, and the young men flocked to see him in a scene described by Plato in his dialogue, *Protagoras*.

Though Plato disagreed with Protagoras of Abdera, calling him a Sophist because he took money for teaching, he greatly respected his thought. The cornerstone of Protagoras’s philosophy is found in the opening line of a book that he wrote called *On Truth*: “Of all things the measure is man: of existing things, that they exist; of non-existent things, that they do not exist.” Unfortunately, however, the rest of *On Truth* has been lost. Still, two major characteristics of humanism are quite clear from the line that survived: first, by “man” he means the individual; and second, by “measure” he means judge.

Consequently, at the heart of humanism is the idea that the individual is the judge of whether a thing has a particular nature or not. So, if something appears to have a particular nature, then it has that particular nature. In other words, for Protagoras, all beliefs are true. Thus, at the origins of humanism is *relativism*, the view that no absolutes exist and that human judgment is always conditioned by a number of factors including our personal biases and beliefs.

What is immediately striking here is the opposition of Protagoras’s humanism to the thought of Plato and Aristotle, who would never say that something is true just because we believe it to be true. Plato believed that the world as it appears to us is but a reflection of an ideal world: the

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