



liberal arts, and the advantages of being useless

Nicholaos Jones
Department of Philosophy
University of Alabama in Huntsville
nick[DOT]jones[AT]uah[DOT]edu

1 Introductory Remarks

The trees of the mountain bring their own destruction.
The oil in the lamp burns itself.
The cinnamon tree is edible, so it is cut down.
The varnish tree is useful so it is cut apart.
All know the advantage of being useful,
but no one knows the advantage of being useless.
- 莊子 [Zhuangzi] (364-290 BCE), *Zhuangzi*, "Transactions in the World of Men"

When we are young, it's easy to figure out what to do next. At least, that was my experience. In high school, I knew what I was going to do after each school day: sports practice (I was a jock), then eat, then watch some TV, then sleep. And I knew what I was going to do after high school graduation: go to college. And I knew what I was going to do after each school day again: go to work (I was poor), then eat, then watch some TV, then sleep. I even knew what I was going to do after college graduation: go to graduate school.

Of course, I ended my undergraduate schooling with a philosophy degree. So it wasn't much of a surprise to anyone that I went to graduate school. After all, what *else* was I going to do with a philosophy degree? Law school, maybe. But anyone who knew me also knew I didn't have a penchant for lawyering. And everyone knew I also had no desire to flip burgers or deliver pizzas. It seems my hand was pretty much forced: graduate school or bust.

Lucky for me I got admitted to a graduate program. Otherwise, who knows – I might *still* be unemployed, or stuck flipping burgers like all the other philosophy majors who don't go to graduate school. I mean, if there's any college major that's totally useless, it's got to be Philosophy!

Of course, I don't mean to be biased toward Philosophy. There are *lots* of useless college majors: History, English, Music, Sociology ... pretty much the entire repertoire of Liberal Arts.

I bet there are some of you who disagree, who think Liberal Arts degrees aren't useless. You're wrong. I also bet that, among those of you who *agree*, who think Liberal Arts degrees *are* useless, you're wrong about *why* they are useless. One of my goals, accordingly, is to explain why Liberal Arts degrees really are useless and why people are right to say so.

But I don't want to be a Negative Ned. I want to give you something positive. So I have two other goals. I'm going to tell you what the Liberal Arts *are* – what's so *liberal* about them, and why they're *arts*. This is going to support my explanation of why Liberal Arts degrees are useless; and it's also going to help with a third goal. Because I'm going to convince you that the uselessness of Liberal Arts degrees is advantageous. I'm going to argue that people who major or minor in a liberal arts discipline are *better off* than people who don't. And I'm going to argue that these people are better off *precisely because* Liberal Arts degrees are useless.

2 "What Are You Going To Do With *That* Degree?"

Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good. [This good] seems different in different actions and arts; it is different in medicine, in strategy, and in the other arts likewise. What then is the good of each? Surely that for whose sake everything else is done. In medicine this is health, in strategy victory, in architecture a house, and in any other sphere something else, and in every action and pursuit the end.

- Ἀριστοτέλης [Aristotle] (384-332 BCE), *Nicomachean Ethics* Book I

Probably one of the most useless people in the history of the world is an ancient Greek guy by the name of Aristotle. Even though he initiated many of our modern scientific disciplines – biology, zoology, psychology, and so on – he sucked at being a scientist. Pretty much every theory he ever proposed has turned out to be false.

I blame Aristotle's teacher, Plato. Better yet, I blame *Plato's* teacher, Socrates. Socrates is the only philosopher to make a guest appearance in *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure*. He earned a reputation among Athenians for asking people all sorts of annoying questions – Socrates was so annoying that he was nicknamed the gadfly of Athens, and he was so good at being an annoying gadfly that he got himself executed for annoying everyone. Aristotle was no different – well, he didn't quite get himself executed (he wasn't *that* annoying); but he was very fond of asking people questions.



Among his many intellectual pursuits, Aristotle liked to ask people whether they were doing anything useful with their lives. This is pretty ironic, since Aristotle was doing philosophy with his life – and philosophy, many people tell me, is more useless than just about anything else.

But let's set aside the irony. Aristotle had a method. He thought that a good way to figure out whether an activity was useful was to ask people *why* they were doing it: if the *goal* of the activity was worthwhile, and the activity really was a way to achieve that goal, this would be good evidence that the activity itself was useful.

Here's an example. Want to know whether furniture-making is useful? Ask people what the goal of furniture-making is. Obviously, to make furniture. Don't care about having furniture? Well, then, furniture-making is pretty useless.

Here's another. Want to know whether medicine is useful? Ask people what the goal of medicine is. Most will say, to make people healthy. Care about health? Think that medicine really is a way to make people healthy? If so, medicine is pretty useful. If not, I guess you may as well do philosophy.

This is all pretty abstract to some people. When I teach Aristotle in my Introduction to Philosophy course, I like to have them apply Aristotle's method to their lives as college students. (This is called *making the course relevant to students*.) So I ask them whether their college education is useful in any way. I start with their Introduction to Philosophy class. I ask, "Why are you in this class?" They typically answer, "Because it satisfies a General Education requirement for my degree." Since not every class satisfies a General Education requirement, I ask something more general. I ask, "Why do you want a college degree?" The standard answer is: "To get a good job." And since I have serious doubts that students are in college *just to be able to work*, I ask: "Why do you want a good job?" The standard answer is economic: "Because I want to make good money."

Now we're getting somewhere. This is an *incredibly* popular reason people give for pursuing a college degree. In 2011, a poll by Gallup found that 50% of people want a college degree in order to *earn more money*. The poll also found that 30% want a degree in order to *get a good job*. If we, very reasonably, assume that good jobs are jobs that pay well, it seems that about 80% of people in college agree: the goal of a college education is making good money.

Supposing that my students are pursuing their college degree for the sake of making good money, I ask them how their degree is going to help them achieve this goal.

If their major is something in Business – Accounting, Finance, Information Systems, Marketing, Management – the answer is pretty easy: "I'm going to get a job in <insert name of Business major here>." Good answer; these jobs (CPA, Money Market Manager) make good money.



If their major is Nursing, the answer is also pretty easy: "I'm going to get a job in Nursing." Another good answer; nursing jobs (Pediatrics Nurse, nurse in Huntsville Hospital ER) make good money.

If their major is something in Engineering – Chemical & Material, Civil & Environmental, Electrical & Computer, Industrial & Systems, Mechanical & Aerospace – the answer is, once again, easy: "I'm going to get a job in <insert name of Engineering major here>." Yet another good answer; engineering jobs (at NASA, as Product Designer at an R&D company) are some of the highest paying jobs there are.

If their major is something in Science – Atmospheric Science, Biology, Biotechnology, Chemistry, Computer Science, Earth Systems, Materials Science, Mathematics, Modeling & Simulation, Optics, Physics, Software Engineering – the answer is a bit more complex, but still relatively easy: "I'm going to get a science-related job." The job area might be harder to name, but the students are pretty confident that the jobs exist nonetheless. And, whatever these jobs are, certainly they pay good money.

Every once in a while, of course, a few students will be pursuing a major in Liberal Arts – Art & Art History, Classics, Communications, Education, English, Foreign Languages, History, Music, Philosophy, Political Science, Psychology, Sociology. Compared to majors in other Colleges, far more Liberal Arts degrees *lack* an obvious answer regarding how possessing that degree will help one make good money. I mean, what jobs *are there* in History, or English, or Philosophy, or Sociology?

There are *teaching* jobs, sure. After all, teaching is what *I* did with *my* degree. But nobody seriously thinks that *teaching* is a way to earn good money. If anything, teaching is for people who *can't* make good money. Whence the adage: those who can, do; those who can't, teach.

In some rare cases, like Communications or Art, people can answer: "I'm going to get a job in <insert name of Liberal Arts major here>." But I doubt anyone really thinks that *these* jobs (Journalist, Web Designer) are ways to make good money.

This is a serious problem for Liberal Arts majors. When someone asks, "What are you going to *do* with a Liberal Arts degree?", it seems that the answer has to be *either* "I'm going to teach " *or* "I have no idea." Neither answer inspires very much confidence that the Liberal Arts degree is a way to make good money. Whence the joke:

The Science major asks, "Why does it work?"

The Engineering major asks, "How does it work?"

The Business major asks, "How much does it cost?"

The Liberal Arts major asks, "Would you like fries with that?"



If a degree doesn't make a person good money, then, if we're following Aristotle's method, it follows that a Liberal Arts degree is pretty useless.

3 Why Liberal Arts Degrees are Useless – A Lame Explanation

The thought experiment for applying Aristotle's method to the life of a typical college student is pretty fun. But I think it doesn't explain why Liberal Arts degrees are useless. I'm pretty certain I made a mistake somewhere in my reasoning. Because there's pretty good evidence that even people with Liberal Arts degrees have pretty much the same chance as other majors to end up making good money.

I don't want to bore you with all the evidence – that's why we have administrators, and if you're curious I'm sure the Dean of our College will be happy to send you numbers. Instead, let me share with you some results from a January 2012 study from Georgetown University.¹ These are results about unemployment rates for recent graduates and average salaries for recent graduates:

MAJOR	UNEMPLOYMENT RATES	EARNINGS OF
	RECENT COLLEGE GRADUATES	RECENT COLLEGE GRADUATES
AGRICULTURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES	7.00%	\$32,000
SCIENCE- LIFE/PHYSICAL	7.70%	\$32,000
ARCHITECTURE	13.90%	\$36,000
HUMANITIES AND LIBERAL ARTS	9.40%	\$31,000
COMMUNICATIONS, JOURNALISM	7.30%	\$33,000
COMPUTERS AND MATHEMATICS	8.20%	\$46,000
EDUCATION	5.40%	\$33,000
ENGINEERING	7.50%	\$55,000
LAW AND PUBLIC POLICY	8.10%	\$34,000
SOCIAL SCIENCE	8.90%	\$37,000
HEALTH	5.40%	\$43,000
PSYCHOLOGY AND SOCIAL WORK	7.30%	\$30,000
RECREATION	8.30%	\$30,000
ARTS	11.10%	\$30,000
BUSINESS	7.40%	\$39,000

Source: Hard Times: Not All College Majors Are Created Equal

This evidence suggests to me, and I hope it suggests to you, that Liberal Arts degrees aren't useless for getting a job. They bring a *slightly* greater risk of unemployment *immediately after graduation* – while 95 out of 100 students with a Health degree get a job quickly after graduating, and 93 out of 100 students with a Science, Business, or Engineering degree get a job quickly after graduating, "only" 90 out of 100 students with a Liberal Arts degree get a job quickly after graduating. If you ask me, I don't think that extra 3% risk is all that significant.

This evidence also suggests to me that Liberal Arts degrees aren't useless for making good money. The difference in *starting salary* between people with Liberal Arts degrees and Health or Business degrees is about \$13,000 per year; between people with Liberal Arts degrees and Science degrees, about \$1,000 per year.

¹ A.P. Carnevale, B. Cheah, and J. Strohl, *Hard Times: Not All College Majors Are Created Equal* (2012).



But this is data for *early in one's career*. There's good evidence that Liberal Arts majors tend to earn *higher* salaries by midcareer. For example, a 2008 report from payscale.com shows that people with Philosophy degrees earn about \$81,000 per year mid-career, compared with \$77,000 for Accounting degrees, \$67,000 for Nursing degrees, and \$65,000 for Biology degrees.

Still, I guess one could make an argument that Liberal Arts degrees are useless for the following reason: they're useless for *maximal one's salary immediately after graduation*. But this is a *really bad* argument. If it were correct, it would be useless to do anything that doesn't give an immediate financial reward. Nobody thinks *that*, I hope.

This economic information is boring, sure. But it is important. It shows that Liberal Arts degrees can't be useless for the reason most people think they're useless. Because people with Liberal Arts degrees have really good chances for getting jobs when they graduate, and they have really good chances for eventually getting jobs that pay good money.

4 Why Liberal Arts Degrees are Useless – A "Name" Explanation

"My good fellow," I say, "give me a moment." "I have not a moment to spare," says he. "Why?" I enquire. "I must be banking," he replies.... "And what," I continue my interrogatory, "is banking?" "Sir," says he, "it is my business." "Your business?" I repeat. "And what is a man's business?" "Why," cries the banker, "a man's business is his duty."

But this is a sort of answer that provokes reflection. Is a man's business his duty? Or perhaps should not his business be his duty? If it is not my duty to conduct a bank (and I contend that it is not) is it the duty of my friend the banker? Who told him it was? Is it in the Bible? Is he sure that banks are a good thing? Might it not be his duty to stand aside and let some one else conduct the bank? Or perhaps ought he not to have been a ship-captain instead? All these perplexing queries may be summed up under one head: the grave problem which my friend offers to the world: Why is he a Banker?

Well, why is it? There is one principal reason, I conceive: that the man was trapped. Education, as practised, is a form of harnessing with the friendliest of intentions. The fellow was hardly in trousers before they whipped him into school; hardly done with school before they smuggled him into an office ... and all this before he has had time so much as to imagine that there may be any other practical course. Drum, drum, drum ... you must be in time for school; ... you must keep your hands clean; you must go to parties – a young man should make friends; and, finally – you must take this opening in a bank.... The trick is performed ...; the wild ass's colt is broken in; and now sits diligently scribing. Thus it is, that, out of men, we make bankers.

- Robert Louis Stevenson, "On the Choice of a Profession" (1916)

Let me suggest to you a different, and better, explanation for why Liberal Arts degrees are useless. I got the hint for this explanation by thinking about our little thought experiment with Aristotle's method.



With majors in other colleges, you can pretty much use the name of the degree to *read off* what you're going to do with that degree, and the jobs you read off in this way are known ways to make good money. Majoring in Accounting? You're going to get an accounting job, and everybody knows accounting pays well. Majoring in Nursing? You're going to get a nursing job, and everybody knows nursing pays well. Majoring in Computer Science? You're going to get a computing job, and everybody knows computing pays well.

When it comes to Liberal Arts, either you *can't* use the name of the degree to read off what you're going to do with the degree, or you *can* but the job you read off is known to *not* pay well. Majoring in Philosophy? Last I checked, there aren't any job advertisements for philosophers in the newspapers. Majoring in Music? I guess you'll be a musician; good luck making money at that!

This, I think, is why a Liberal Arts degree is useless: it requires some *creativity* and *unguided exploration* after you get it in order for you to *figure out* what you want to *do* with it. And it requires these things because you can't read the name of a good paying job off of a Liberal Arts degree.

If someone asks a Liberal Arts major what she is going to *do* with her degree, the best she can say is, "I'm not quite sure, but I'm pretty certain that I have roughly the same chance as any other major for getting a job and that by the middle of my career I'll have an income that is just as good, if not better, than people with those other degrees." Not the best sound bite. But it has the virtue of being true.

5 The "Arts" in Liberal Arts

Happiness is as light as a feather but no one knows how to hold it.
 Misfortune is heavier than the earth and no one knows how to avoid it.
 You are in danger, you are in danger,
 Rushing into the areas you have marked out.
 Thorns and bristles do not stand in my way!
 I walk backwards or crookedly to protect my feet.
 - 莊子 [Zhuangzi], *Zhuangzi*, "Transactions in the World of Men"

There's a very good reason that a Liberal Arts degree doesn't indicate the kind of job one can do by virtue of possessing it. This reason doesn't have anything to do with *marketing* – it's not that the *names for Liberal Arts majors* are badly chosen. And it doesn't have anything to do with *politics* – it's not that our society doesn't make the right sorts of jobs available. Instead, the reason has everything to do with what the Liberal Arts *are*. I'm going to explain what the Liberal Arts are in two parts – first, I'll explain why they're *arts*; second, why they're *liberal*.

In 1948, the German philosopher Eugen Herrigel published *Zen in the Art of Archery*. This short book introduced Europe to Zen practice, and it spawned an industry of similar books: *Zen in the Art of Writing*, *Zen and the Art of Competitive Eating*, and perhaps



most famously *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. The basic theme in these books is that Zen can introduce a spiritual dimension into an otherwise ordinary practice. But let's set aside the nature of Zen, whether Zen is spiritual, and how Zen might influence the performance of various practices. Let's focus instead on the "art" in the book titles.

Each book characterizes some practice – archery, writing, competitive eating, motorcycle maintenance – as an art. This isn't because the practices produce something like a work of art: the art of archery, for example, produces people who shoot arrows well; and the art of competitive eating produces people who combine speed and endurance when eating. But neither archers nor competitive eaters are works of art – unless, of course, one is willing to count a trained person as a work of art.

The reason each of these practices are arts is because each practice is a craft which applies special principles and methods toward achieving a special goal. For example, the principles and methods of archery include good archery equipment, breath control, stance, aiming and concentration, shooting dynamics, and follow-through; and these elements are directed toward hitting archery targets. Competitive eating likewise involves principles and methods – for example, many competitors follow the water-dunking principle, which says to saturate food in water in order to chew it faster and swallow it easier; and hot-dog eaters sometimes follow Kobayashi's "Solomon Technique," which involves breaking hotdogs in half and simultaneously stuffing both halves into one's mouth.

Accordingly, *an art is a craft which applies principles and methods toward the achievement of a goal proper to the craft*. Learning an art involves learning the principles and methods and then developing skill through practice in applying these principles and methods. This is the reason why the Liberal Arts are *arts*: each major in the Liberal Arts is a craft which applies principles and methods toward achieving a special goal. And the Liberal Arts are liberal, because these goals are, in some sense, "liberal" goals.

6 The "Liberal" in Liberal Arts

Upon return, a newly released prisoner [of war] commented to a chaplain, "These guys that had had some liberal arts really had it." By this he meant that there were lessons to be learned from the humanities that were not available anywhere else. After all, why would someone tap a question through the wall about *Hamlet*, AND BE WILLING TO WAIT 30 days for the answer? "There must have been some reason other than boredom."

- Julia T. Cadenhead, CAPT CHC, USN (ed.), *Captivity: The Extreme Circumstance* (United States Navy: 2001)

People means lots of different things when they characterize something as liberal: left-leaning politically, as in "liberal Democrat;" free or generous in giving, as in "liberal philanthropist;" a large or copious amount, as in "liberal dinner serving." But the Liberal



Arts aren't liberal in any of these senses. Instead, they're liberal in a sense that dates back to the fourth century Algerian philosopher Augustine:

liberal: worthy of or suitable for a free person.

An art is liberal, in this sense, when it prepares a person to be an active and responsible citizen, capable of participating articulately and reasonably in civic and political activities. In a pluralistic democracy like ours, where a multiplicity of cultures and beliefs sustains deep and persistent disagreements, active and responsible citizenship demands:

- proficiency and patience for hearing others on their own terms,
- wisdom and compassion for fairly weighing and critically evaluating competing priorities,
- clarity and gracefulness for communicating and reasoning with those who do not share one's beliefs and values, as well as
- creativity and imagination in searches for compromise.

People who study the Liberal Arts acquire these capacities. Consider, for example, five disciplines in UAH's College of Liberal Arts (my home institution), and some information about those disciplines I've taken from departmental homepages.

Art & Art History. The goal of studying Art & Art History is the ability to understand the forms, concepts, methods, and records of human visual expression. Achieving this goal fosters creativity, confidence, self-discipline, and individuality.

Language & Literature. The goal of studying Language & Literature is the ability to understand, contextualize, interpret, and create literature. Achieving this goal fosters intellectual curiosity, critical thinking and reading, linguistic proficiency, awareness of alternative ways of life, as well as clear, graceful, persuasive writing and speaking.

History. The goal of studying History is the ability to understand past cultures as well as social and political developments through time. Achieving this goal fosters skills for crafting narratives, weighing conflicting interpretations, explaining and identifying trends, and discerning between the important and the inconsequential.

Music. The goal of studying Music is the ability to understand, appreciate, and enact the artistic and communicative values of music. Achieving this goal fosters an integration of physical capacities (such as instrument technique), emotional expression (such as musical performance), and intellectual abstraction (such as reading the structure and notation of musical language).



Philosophy. The goal of studying Philosophy is the ability to understand and evaluate assumptions that structure the range of human experiences. Achieving this goal fosters skills for articulating assumptions, evaluating assumptions and reasoning, proposing and defending alternatives, and explaining ideas and principles to others.

The goals one aims to achieve in pursuing a Liberal Arts degree transcend the particular content of those degrees; they are goals which ought to be achieved by any active and responsible citizen. For example, understanding records of human visual expression is relevant not only to appreciating works of art but also to engaging critically with visual methods of political communication. Likewise, interpreting and contextualizing literature is relevant not only to reading books but also to engaging critically with written forms of political communication and people with diverse cultural backgrounds; understanding sociocultural dynamics is relevant not only to knowing our past but also to assessing proposals about how to move forward as a society; and understanding and evaluating assumptions is relevant not only to reading and writing about esoteric philosophical texts but also to assessing critically political ideologies.

Furthermore, the skills one develops while pursuing a Liberal Arts degree are skills worthy of and appropriate to free citizens. They foster development of one's personal identity as well as development of one's identity within a political community. Exposure to people and traditions with different beliefs and value priorities enhances awareness of the assumptions, priorities, and possibilities accepted by oneself and one's culture. Such exposure also encourages a sense of wonder and amazement; it enables one to think clearly, comprehensively, and compassionately about public goods and the relation of one's political community to the wider world; and it develops capacities for succeeding in leadership roles. I am reminded of a Winnie the Pooh-inspired poem about making one's way in life:

How can you get very far,
 If you don't know Who You Are?
 How can you do what you ought,
 If you don't know What You've Got?
 And if you don't know Which To Do
 Of all the things in front of you,
 Then what you'll have when you are through
 Is just a mess without a clue
 Of all the best that can come true
 If you know What and Which and Who.
 - Benjamin Hoff, *The Tao of Pooh*, "Cottleston Pie" (1982)

These consequences of pursuing a Liberal Arts degree do not occur, except by accident, in the pursuit of more technical or vocational degrees. For example, the goal of Engineering is to understand an array of engineering principles and methods, and pursuing this goal fosters specialized skills for engineering applications – and, perhaps,



for improving the world in planned ways. The goal of Nursing is to understand an array of nursing principles and methods, and pursuing this goal fosters skills for therapeutic interventions, disease prevention, and health promotion – and, perhaps, for caring about others. The goal of Business is to acquire knowledge of various business theories and practices, and pursuing this goal fosters specialized skills for business applications – and, perhaps, for making money. Yet, despite the value of these goals and skills, achieving the goals is not necessary for being an active and responsible citizen, and the skills do not foster the development of, or insight into, one's personal or political identity.

7 Why Liberal Arts Majors/Minors Are Better Off

You have noticed, I hope, that man is only an amateur animal; all the others are professionals. They have no leisure and do not desire it. When the cow has finished eating she chews the cud; when she has finished chewing she sleeps; when she has finished sleeping she eats again. She is a machine for turning grass into calves and milk – in other words, for producing more cows.

- C.S. Lewis, "Our English Syllabus," *Rehabilitations and Other Essays* (1939)

Technical and vocational disciplines – Engineering, Nursing, Business – make people useful to others for specialized purposes; but they do not make people better citizens. Nor should they. When one's primary aim is to acquire a specialized knowledge-base and skill-set, abilities associated with active and responsible citizenship are at best accidental side effects, at worst irrelevant distractions. For example, an engineering student might, as a result of working on a project about how to improve the living conditions of impoverished citizens, acquire some insight into and compassion towards the lives of poor people; but this insight and compassion is largely irrelevant to completing the project. A business student might, as a result of studying penal incentives in a game theoretic framework, acquire a critical attitude toward the ways in which public laws adversely and disproportionately affect minorities; but this attitude is largely irrelevant to developing a good game theoretic model. And a nursing student might, as a result of interning at a local hospital, acquire compassion for others and respect for people from different backgrounds; but these outcomes are largely irrelevant to competence in administering health care.

Liberal Arts disciplines, in contrast, make people better citizens; but they do not make people useful to others for any particular purpose. Nor should they. When one's primary aim is to think clearly, comprehensively, and compassionately about one's self and one's community, knowledge and skills associated with particular vocations or professions are at best one means among many others for understanding society, at worst irrelevant distractions.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Liberal Arts degrees are useless. Their names do not readily suggest what one is able to do with them, because the ultimate aim of a



Liberal Arts degree is not to make its holder useful to others for some particular purpose.

That said, there is a sense in which people with a Liberal Arts degree, or at least some background in Liberal Arts, are better off than people without. People with a Liberal Arts degree have extensive and focused training for reading with comprehension, reasoning properly, communicating creatively and effectively, exploring possibilities, interpreting and assessing, incorporating and weighing different perspectives, and sustaining intellectual curiosity. They develop these skills while completing their course work. There is also good evidence that employers – especially in the business sector – find these skills to be valuable, so much so that employers often express a preference for people with these skills rather than more specialized skills – the thought being, I assume, that a short training program will suffice to impart the more specialized skills. Consider this anecdote from Tom Gillis, writing for *Forbes* magazine:

In the coming decades, success will be defined by the ability to understand the complex problems that customers face, and the ability to solve these problems elegantly. Technology development is important, as is finance, manufacturing, and distribution. But these areas are not core competencies for the industry leaders. The next billion-dollar company will be run by history majors who are skilled in wading through a massive jumble of facts and who have the ability to distill these facts down to a clear set of objectives that a global team can fulfill.

Given this attitude in the business world, it seems safe to say that people with Liberal Arts degrees are not at any kind of significant disadvantage compared to people with, say, Business degrees.

But there's more. Because there's more to life than a job. If one works 40 hours per week, and devotes 10 hours per day to eating and sleeping, one preserves 58 hours per week for other, non-work-related activities. And even if this estimate is overly ambitious, most of us will have at least a significant part of one day every week during which we need neither eat, work, nor sleep. Let's call this time, whatever its duration, one's leisure time. C.S. Lewis, in his essay "Our English Syllabus," noted that

Vocational training ... prepares the pupil not for leisure, but for work; it aims at making not a good man but a good banker, a good electrician, a good scavenger, or a good surgeon.

So the question I want to consider is this: *what will one do with one's leisure time after graduating?*

Many people, I think, spend their leisure time engaging in relatively passive activities, like watching television programs or movies or sporting events. Others have more active hobbies, such as playing golf or hiking. These kinds of activity, the passive ones and the hobbies, share a common feature: they occur in a fixed environment, and they occur



outside what we might think of as "mundane activities of everyday life" – waiting in a check-out line at the grocery store, sitting in rush hour traffic, showering, getting dressed, and so on. One reason to engage in less mundane activities, such as hiking or watching football games, is to stave off the monotony and boredom that comes from the mundane ones. Another reason is to forestall cynicism or exhaustion regarding one's work activities.

The mundane activities of life, however, are unavoidable; and unless one is unusually adept at distracting oneself, the mundane activities of life are the times when people tend to experience boredom, frustration, and restlessness. A degree in the Liberal Arts benefits people by altering their possibilities of experience during the mundane activities of life. Standing in line at the supermarket? You have the tools for engaging critically with the visual expressions on magazine covers. Stuck in traffic? You have the tools for reflecting on the worthwhileness of values that lead so many people to commute in the ways they do. Stuck at an airport? You have the tools to explore different cultural assumptions, and alternative interpretations, of the book you happened to buy in the lobby. Incensed by something you saw on the news? You have the tools to write an articulate and thoughtful letter to the editor for your local newspaper.

Sure, people without a Liberal Arts degree might do these things too. But, insofar as people are more prone to engage in activities in which they are practiced and feel comfortable, they are less likely to enhance their mundane activities in this way. And insofar as people with less practice must give more effort, they are more likely to perform such activities poorly or quit out of "boredom."

8 Mud Slinging

Zhuangzi was fishing in the Pu River when the Prince of Chu sent two high officials with a message. "Our Prince desires to offer you a position in his government."

Zhuangzi went on fishing without turning his head and said, "I have heard that in Chu there is a sacred tortoise which died three thousand years ago. The prince keeps it covered with a cloth in a hamper in his ancestral temple. What would you say that the tortoise would have preferred: to die and leave its shell to be venerated, or to live and keep on dragging its tail over the mud?"

"It would have preferred to live and drag its tail over the mud," said the officials.

Zhuangzi said, "Good-bye. I will keep dragging my tail over the mud."

- 莊子 [Zhuangzi], *Zhuangzi*, "Autumn Floods"

Let's turn to summing up.

A Liberal Arts degree is *not* useless for getting a good job or making good money. Yes, it brings with it a slightly higher chance of not finding a job *immediately after graduation*. And yes, the jobs you can get with a Liberal Arts degree pay slightly less well *early in your career*. But over time, employment rates are roughly the same for Liberal Arts



majors and other majors, and by mid-career people with Liberal Arts degrees often make at least as much as people with other degrees.

A Liberal Arts degree is useless, because *either* you can't use the name of the degree to read off what you're going to do with the degree, *or* you can but the job you read off is known to not pay well. And the reason you can't do these things is that Liberal Arts disciplines are designed to give you the tools for being an active and responsible citizen, rather than tools for performing a specialized task for someone else.

When people ask, "What are you going to do with a Liberal Arts degree?", the shortest response is a look of puzzlement. A short and polite answer is, "Good question." A longer and more conciliatory answer is, "I guess I'll go to law school, and if that fails I guess I'll see you at Pizza Hut." An even longer answer, which engages with the question on economic terms and has the virtue of being true, is, "I'm not quite sure, but I'm pretty certain that I have roughly the same chance as any other major for getting a job and that by the middle of my career I'll have an income that is just as good, if not better, than people with those other degrees."

I imagine that people who are pursuing a Liberal Arts degree often feel like the deck is stacked against them when it comes to conversations about their degree. The conversation invariably turns to the "What are you going to *do* with your degree?" question, and the conventional answer to this question is a specific job name. This means that one can't give any kind of conventional answer to the question – and if one were to give my suggested long-but-true answer, I imagine the questioner either wouldn't listen or would respond with a shrug.

So let me leave you with a fairer question. This a question to which *all* majors, from any college, can give a decent answer. It is a question that does not stack the deck against Liberal Arts majors. And the answer to this question is an answer you might give when people ask the more conventional "What are you going to do with your degree?" question. The question is this:

"What kind of person is your degree going to help you be?"

If you're a Liberal Arts major, you have a quick and ready answer: "I am going to be a more reflective and engaged individual, and an active, responsible contributor to my community capable of succeeding in leadership positions."

