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Uselessness: A Panegyric

DAVID CURRY

"It is completely inappropriate for magnanimous and free people to be always asking what use something is."

—ARISTOTLE[1]

"You know, we don't need a lot more anthropologists in the state. It's a great degree if people want to get it, but we don't need them here. I want to spend our dollars giving people science, technology, engineering, math degrees. That's what our kids need to focus all their time and attention on. Those type of degrees. So when they get out of school, they can get a job."

—FLORIDA GOVERNOR RICK SCOTT[2]

"I'm looking at legislation right now . . . which would change the basic formula in how education money is given out to our universities and our community colleges. It's not based on butts in seats but on how many of those butts can get jobs."

—NORTH CAROLINA GOVERNOR PATRICK MCCRORY[3]

I care to argue for a thesis which appears to me to be so self-evidently true that it has become obscure. This self-evident truth is that studying useless things is a necessary component of any educational system that seeks to build character and hence citizenship. Useful, vocational job training is all well and good. There is certainly a proper place for it. But the contemporary

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prejudice against the useless obscures the value of studying the useful just as insidiously as it obscures the value of studying the useless.

Work can build character, at least aspects of character. This I do not want to deny. But for a human being to live a good life one needs more than the useful: more than work and also more, as we will see, than amusement or play. Likewise, to be a good citizen one needs to be more than a good worker, more than a cog in the machine. One needs the critical thinking and critical imagining skills fostered by engaging with the useless, which can be fully developed only through such engagement.

I know that this thesis, as self-evident as I take it to be, will not appear self-evident to the Rick Scotts and Patrick McCrorys of the world, nor to those well-meaning parents who impress upon their children the need to learn a vocation. It is those voices which have been driving the vocationalist turn in higher education that emphasizes 'professional' degrees and disparages the study of philosophy, English literature, anthropology, history, political science and other useless subject matters. The oft heard refrain, 'what does one do with a degree in X?' betrays a fundamental misunderstanding about the nature and goal of education. My own standard reply is, 'Anything one might want to do', a shorthand way of suggesting, gently, that the question is misconceived. What one should say, were one more honest and less tactful, is that a degree in X (substitute your own favorite useless subject matter) doesn't prepare you to *do* anything at all, but that to think of education as primarily preparing you for a life of *doing*, where *doing* is understood vocationally, is deeply wrongheaded. More honest still, but needing explication, is that the only way to attain real success in *doing* is to learn to live well when not *doing*.

Long ago, Aristotle addressed precisely these issues, and since what I am saying is nothing new, it seems appropriate to turn to such a long dead thinker to help me say it. In his day too there were the frogs in the swamp, croaking for the useful, and, typically, Aristotle gave them their due.

> Investigation of the education we see around us results in confusion, since it is not at all clear whether people should be trained in what is useful for life, in what conduces to virtue, or in something out of the ordinary. For all of these proposals have acquired some advocates.[4]

Nevertheless, Aristotle makes it quite clear which of these options he thinks we ought to reject.

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> That children should be taught those useful things that are really necessary, however, is not unclear. But it is evident that they should not be taught all of them, since there is a difference between the tasks of the free and those of the unfree, and that they should share only in such useful things as will not turn them into vulgar craftsmen. (Any task, craft, or branch of learning should be considered vulgar if it renders the body or mind of free people useless for the practices and activities of virtue. That is why the crafts that put the body into a worse condition and work done for wages are called vulgar; for they debase the mind and deprive it of leisure).[5]

The passage is difficult to make good sense of, particularly for the vast majority of us who must earn wages for a living. It reeks of an unacceptable elitism. But if we take care to understand what Aristotle is saying, there is an important lesson here for us moderns, even if we must distance ourselves from some of what Aristotle believes.

Let's start at the end of the passage, with the terms translated there as 'work' and 'leisure' (*ascholia* and *scholia*, respectively). Work is what we do in order to acquire the necessities in life; leisurely activities are those we engage in only for their own sake, and never for the sake of something else. ". . . these subjects and studies [i.e., leisurely ones] are undertaken for their own sake, whereas those relating to work are necessary and for the sake of things other than themselves."[6]

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, it is precisely such leisurely activities which Aristotle takes to be definitive of the chief good, *eudaimonia*, or happiness, ". . . happiness seems to depend on leisure, because we work to have leisure, and wage war to live in peace."[7] So Aristotle is identifying leisure activities, useless activities, with the kind of choice-worthy activity characteristic of human excellence or virtue.

Leisurely activities are to be clearly distinguished from what Aristotle terms 'amusement', and hence to be distinguished from what we moderns dub 'leisure'. Whereas Aristotelian leisure is useless, amusement is useful. Amusements are to be used to relax, as an antidote to the stress caused by work. He says, "for one who exerts himself needs relaxation, relaxation is the end of amusement, and work is accompanied by toil and strain, then we should, for this reason, permit amusement, but we should be careful to use it at the right time, dispensing it as a medicine for the ills of work."[8]

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Leisurely activities, on the other hand, are those that we perform only for their own sake and never for the sake of anything else. They are activities which one freely chooses to engage in as their own reward.

> Leisured activity is itself held to involve pleasure, happiness, and living blessedly. This is not available to those who are working, however, but only to those who are engaged in leisured activity. For one who is working is doing so for the sake of some end he does not possess, whereas happiness is an end that everyone thinks is accompanied not by pain but by pleasure. This pleasure is not the same for everyone, however, but each takes it to be what suits himself and his condition, and the best person takes it to be the best pleasure, the one that comes from the noblest things. It is evident, then, that we should learn and be taught certain things that promote leisured activity. And these subjects and studies are undertaken for their own sake, whereas those relating to work are necessary and for the sake of things other than themselves.[9]

Paradigmatically, for Aristotle, leisurely activities involve philosophical contemplation, broadly construed as the kind of thinking we engage in when struggling with philosophical, literary, anthropological, sociological, political, or scientific problems for the sake of the struggle itself—merely for the sake of sorting them out, as opposed to having them be sorted. Having them sorted might prove useful, of course, but that is not the reason why we engage in the sorting. Whereas amusements are and should be usefully relaxing, leisurely activities are often quite uselessly demanding. They are, at the risk of introducing a serious ambiguity, often quite hard work.

. . . when we as citizens engage in political activities, . . . we should . . . because doing so is good in itself.

Political activities are also leisurely, according to Aristotle, although in a secondary sense, since the statesman must understand and value the leisurely contemplative life and its role in happiness. This is important for the statesman to understand for his own sake, of course, but also for the sake of others in his role as statesman. He must take as his goal the maintenance of a state and a constitution which nourishes and protects people's ability to pursue a leisurely life, insofar as possible. You may draw your own conclusion here about how well Governors Scott and McCrory fit this characterization of the statesman.

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So too, when we as citizens engage in political activities, we must aim for the same end, not as politicians but as political actors, and we should engage in those activities because doing so is good in itself (though here too, hopefully not only good in itself, but also good in its results).

Of course, it would be foolish to ignore the useful in our curriculum; the issue isn't an exclusive either/or. The worry, though, is that the Rick Scotts of the world seem to think that it is, and that the pursuit of the useful is all that should be encouraged—if a course of study does not lead to a job, then it is not something that the state should support. One might be excused for being a bit cynical here: for suspecting that the reason such demagogues disdain the useless is because it is precisely the useless that forms and nurtures thoughtful, engaged, and active citizens. Demagogues are not elected by such folks. But cynicism aside, it is important to sort out what should constitute the curriculum and why. In order to do this, it is crucially important to draw the distinctions we have been trying to draw between work, leisure, and amusement.

Aristotle himself notes five branches of learning to be included in the curriculum: reading, writing, drawing, gymnastics (physical training), and music. The former three are primarily, but not exclusively as we will see, to be understood as 'useful'. The latter two are associated with leisure; physical training because it builds character ("gymnastics is taught because it contributes to courage" he remarks in passing); music because it is "a noble leisured activity".[10]

Close to 65 years ago, Mortimer Adler, the great and controversial popularizer of Aristotelian inspired views, argued that a liberal education has three departments, all of which Aristotle hints at in the *Politics*: physical training, moral training, and intellectual training.[11] Physical training contributes to courage, to confidence and, of course, to health; moral training helps to produce good moral habits, that is, Aristotelian virtue/excellence of character; intellectual training produces good intellectual habits, that is, critical thinking and deliberative skill, the foundation of all learning and hence of all leisurely activities.

The distinction Aristotle draws between useless liberal leisure and useful illiberal work, is not a distinction of content, but rather of end. As it so often is for Aristotle, the important question is 'for the sake of what?' and does not focus on the action itself. So one can learn carpentry for liberal or illiberal ends, and so too mathematics and music. One can engage in carpentry or auto repair as an exercise in critical thinking and problem solving or as a vocation. Note also, that the distinction is not always able to be so clearly

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drawn. The best carpenters, auto mechanics and, for that matter, teachers and statesmen, are those who treat their activities not solely as means to earn a wage but also as exercises in problem solving. That they earn a wage while doing so is, from their perspective, value added. This helps to explain why the best of these folks tend to spend much more time engaged in their chosen activity than is strictly required by their employment.

Aristotle expresses this thought, somewhat cryptically, by saying that "What one acts or learns for also makes a big difference. For what one does for one's own sake, for the sake of friends or on account of virtue is not unfree, but someone who does the same thing for others would often be held to be acting like a hired labourer or slave."[12]

Understanding that the distinction is one of end allows us to recognize not only that we might engage in one and the same activity as work or as leisure, but also that in some cases we may have to engage in work as preparation for leisure. So, for example, Aristotle suggests that

> ". . . it is clear that children should be taught some useful subjects (such as reading and writing) not only for their utility, but also because many other areas of study become possible through them. Similarly, they should be taught drawing not in order to avoid making mistakes in their private purchases or being cheated when buying or selling products, but rather because it makes them contemplate the beauty of bodies. It is completely inappropriate for magnanimous and free people to be always asking what use something is."[13]

The useful activities of reading, writing, and drawing are also skills which open up the possibility of leisurely activity, which in turn makes a *eudaimonic* life possible. While education may need to be made compulsory for children, in order to set them on the proper path to habituation, the point of such education is to make individuals who engage in leisurely activity for its own sake. Adler puts it well when he says that,

> "Whenever you find an adult, a chronological adult, who thinks that learning or study is work, let me say that you have met a child. One sign that you have grown up, that you are no longer a child, is that you never regard any part of study or learning as work. As long as learning or study has anything compulsory about it, you are still in the condition of childhood. The mark of truly adult learning is that it is done with no thought of labor or work at all, with no sense of the compulsory."[14]

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Further, ". . . the proper use of leisure time in adult life should obviously include the continuation of schooling—without teachers, without compulsion, without assignments—the kind of learning that adults do outside school, the kind they do in conversations and discussions, in reading and study."[15]

Nowadays, most of us have a limited amount of time to devote to leisurely activities. The vast majority of us, including even those of us blessed to receive our wages, at least in part, for engaging in leisurely activities, need to devote a considerable amount of our time to earning a living. In Aristotelian terms, as expressed in our guiding passage, above, most of us are unfree in much of what we devote ourselves to. The distinction between the free and the unfree is quintessentially the distinction between the free man and the slave. But even the free man is unfree insofar as he must work for a wage. This makes it more important to receive an education which prepares us to take advantage of the little time we might have to enrich our lives. Contra Aristotle, we rightly reject the idea that it is just to deliver opportunities for leisurely activity on the backs of women and slaves. Our leisure time is more honestly earned than that of Aristotle's contemporaries, and thus should be valued even more highly. It is, in Aristotle's own terms, more noble. The leisure time we manage to create for ourselves is all the more precious for its nobility, and the appropriate habits of mind, character, and condition all the more valuable to inculcate.

Once we adjust Aristotle to account for our own generally unfree status, and hence for our greater egalitarianism, I think that we can largely side-step the worry that the view I am defending is unacceptably elitist. One of the more noble aspects of education in the U.S. is that it has always at least paid lip service to the idea that education should be accessible to all segments of the population. What I am decrying is the recent trend of identifying accessibility with vocational training. So what should universal education look like to if it is to inculcate the appropriate habits of mind, character and condition? The Aristotelian answer is simple. Education should be heavily weighted towards the liberal arts, towards engagement with the useless.

Let me elucidate this claim a bit in order to avoid misunderstanding. I am not claiming that it is in any way blameworthy to want one's children to learn a vocation. Learning a vocation is learning a set of skills which are potentially marketable, and thus can help one to earn a living (and, as we will see, cannot be entirely divorced from acquiring the skills needed

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to engage with the useless). What **is** blameworthy is learning a vocation merely for the sake of earning a wage, merely for the sake of possessing the skill itself. I have already suggested that what one does to earn a living is less important than the way in which one goes about doing what one does. The point is precisely that the vocational skills one learns should be put in the service of a higher end, that of critically engaging the mind in the exercise of those skills. How one practices auto repair is what is important, not that one does.

I should also, perhaps, make it clear what I (and Aristotle) take to be the relationship between a liberal education and citizenship. The benefits of a liberal education essentially and centrally include the development of the critical thinking and deliberative skills necessary to sort out the issues which are inevitably placed before the active and engaged citizen. Since becoming liberally educated just is, in this view, becoming a person who cares for the good (moral training) and who is able to deliberate clearly about the good (intellectual training), I am assuming that liberal education will create good citizens. Obviously, such a bold claim cannot be adequately defended here. But the claim, bold as it is, is one which has been widely adopted by societies which seek to create an active citizen body, as well as by those which seek to stifle their citizens (by limiting the opportunities they have to such an education, as Scott and McCrory appear to desire).

What is blameworthy is learning a vocation merely for the sake of earning a wage, . . .

In recent years, the idea of educating for character (moral education), along with the often related idea of educating for citizenship (i.e., for a certain type of leisurely activity) has become something of a mantra among educators and legislators alike. Aristotle is inevitably, and understandably, invoked to give the movement intellectual caché. However, the character-education mantra is fraught with political, philosophical, and social difficulties. There appear to be as many ways of understanding the notion as there are proponents and detractors. Worse, since being adopted by politicians and professional educators, those understandings are often code for one sort of political agenda or another. After all, who could possibly be against educating students for character?

Many states have passed legislation requiring, or encouraging schools to develop character education programs.[16] My own state, New York, calls for schools to "develop comprehensive plans . . . to adopt civility, citizenship

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and character education programs to create an environment of respect and responsibility among all members of the school community . . . Such component shall instruct students on the principles of honesty, tolerance, personal responsibility, respect for others, observance of laws and rules, courtesy, dignity and other traits which will enhance the quality of their experiences in, and contributions to, the community"[17] These programs often take the form of particular curricular additions, integrated into government, health, or history courses.

But if we are to truly appeal to Aristotle, with proper qualification, then character education and education for citizenship should involve a broad education in the liberal arts—in the useless.[18] What we as active citizens and statemen need to ensure is an educational system that prepares a person not for a vocation, but to properly engage in leisurely activities. Adler says, rather overstating his case, that

> "Vocational training is learning for the sake of earning . . . therefore it is an absolute misuse of school to include any vocational training at all. School is a place of learning for the sake of learning, not for the sake of earning. . . . To include vocational training in school *without compensation* is to suppose that it is education, which it is not at all. In contrast to vocational training, liberal education is learning for its own sake or for the sake of further education. It is learning for the sake of all those self-rewarding activities which include the political, aesthetic, and speculative."[19]

Learning for the sake of all those leisurely activities is essentially learning how to think clearly about the difficult. The irony here does not escape me. For while I set out to praise the useless, I may now seem to be praising the useful. This seeming flip-flop helps to explain why the self-evident value of the useless has become obscure. For in order to engage in leisurely activities, those that make a life worth living, I must first acquire the set of skills necessary to engage in those activities well—critical thinking skills, first and foremost. Acquiring those skills is a demanding task. Indeed, it is hard work, justified by its usefulness: a means to a magnificent end. Moreover, in order to acquire critical thinking skills, I must engage with the useless. I must work to learn to think about things which may be of no practical use at all and I must learn to enjoy such thinking and to engage in it for its own sake. The useless and the useful thus turn out to be two sides of a single coin, neither able to be developed, nurtured,

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or inculcated without the other. My conclusion, ironically, is that it is useful to study useless things in order to become truly useful. Further, and most importantly, true usefulness manifests itself in our ability to be productively useless.

This duality is reflected in Aristotle's account of the educated person.

> For an educated man should be able to form a fair judgment as to the goodness or the badness of an exposition. To be educated is in fact to be able to do this; and the man of general education we take to be such. It will, however, of course, be understood that we only ascribe universal education to one who in his own individual person is able to judge nearly all branches of knowledge and not to one who has a like ability merely in some special subject.[20]

The generally educated person is one equipped to make judgments, that is, to think critically, about nearly anything, whether they have specialized training in the relevant special subject or not. This is the most fundamental skill required both to direct one's own living in the world as well as to be an engaged, informed and productive citizen.

The desire to become generally educated is itself something that needs to be developed, nurtured, and habituated. The intellectual habituation required for leisurely activity is deeply bound up with the moral habituation required for the same. Thus, I suggest, there is no education properly so called which is not moral education. Moral education is not a matter of including character education modules into the curriculum; creating citizens of good character is not merely an isolated part of a liberal education. Instead, the curriculum ought to itself be, *in toto*, character education and education for citizenship. So those who argue for more professional programs, those frogs in the swamp who equate education with vocational training, have missed the boat. If education does not focus on developing the desire for the useless, then it cannot produce anything truly useful. Aristotle understood this. Why can't we?

David Curry *has been at work teaching philosophy for 23 years at SUNY Potsdam, where he is a Professor of Philosophy. He spends much of his leisure time reading, thinking about and trying to sort out Plato and Aristotle. For amusement he likes to brew (and drink) beer, play board games, and throw a ball for his dogs.*

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NOTES

This paper has benefited enormously from a careful reading and critique by Devin S. Curry. Grammatically, structurally and argumentatively it is much stronger on account of his feedback. I am also grateful for helpful comments from two anonymous referees. The lapses of judgment which remain are, of course, all my own.

1. Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. by C. D. C. Reeve, (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), 1338a41.

2. Florida Governor Rick Scott, *The Marc Bernier Show*, 10/11/2011.

3. North Carolina Governor Patrick McCrory, *Bill Bennett's Morning In America*, 01/29/2013.

4. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1337a39–42.

5. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1337b3–14.

6. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1138a9–12.

7. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. by Roger Crisp, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1177b2–12; cf., *Politics* 1333a31–b10.

8. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1337a35–40; cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1176b9–1177a11.

9. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1338a1–11.

10. Drawing and music both, perhaps, deserve some comment. Drawing would seem to include basic geometrical design as well as what we would consider visual arts. Hence drawing is useful to develop skill in order, for example, to determine whether or not a product is well constructed. So drawing is useful "for a more correct judgment of the works of artists" (1338a19; oddly, not in Reeve's translation, but in the Greek), but also "to avoid making mistakes in their private purchases or being cheated when buying or selling products." (1338a35). Music too is to be construed quite broadly, not just as performance or musical proficiency but as music theory, and hence mathematical theory, and as a literary pursuit. Hence it too can be a leisurely activity.

11. Mortimer Adler, "Labor, Leisure, and Liberal Education," http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Labor,_Leisure,_and_Liberal_Education 2.

12. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1337b17–20.

13. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1338a33–42.

14. Adler, "Liberal Education," 7.

15. Adler, "Liberal Education," 7.

16. See http://www.character.org/wp-content/uploads/What-States-Are-Doing.pdf for a summary of each States initiatives.

17. Project SAVE 2000. New York's program, is explicitly tied to reducing violence in the schools, hence the acronym SAVE—Safe Schools Against Violence in Education.

18. Indeed, I am arguing that they are one and the same.

19. Adler, "Liberal Education," 7.

20. Aristotle, *Parts of Animals*, trans. by W. Ogle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, Vol. I., ed. by Jonathan Barnes, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 639a1–8.

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