

More on the value of disciplines to the social sciences, and also the standpoint relativity of pretty wrapping

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Abstract. This paper gives further feedback in response to the evening of presentations about the value of different disciplines to the social sciences, at the University of Manchester. I respond to Peter Lawler's presentation for the politics department, or discipline area. The appendix responds to a remark which I found online about Laura Valentini, related to the main content.

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“When your ashes I shall scatter

I shall nevertheless say, ‘You matter.’”

In a previous paper, I referred to an event I observed in the last decade in which different lecturers addressed the value of their discipline to the school of social sciences at the University of Manchester (2022b). Actually the overall intention may have been to present the value of the social sciences to the wider community. Anyway, in the student newspaper the next day, the presentation given by Peter Lawler for the politics department or discipline area was singled out for praise, which is almost the opposite of my reaction, and perhaps points to a large divide which may never be bridged, though the divide can be considerably larger I think.¹ I shall present my reaction, in case someone is interested. From suggestive material, I suppose someone is!

¹ “You are better off moving in the direction of the students’ level than interacting with these people,” I anticipate someone’s advising me.

Thinking back, I remember the anthropologist's case, the sociologist's case, the philosophers' case and the economist's case, but I don't remember the politics case beyond the following. The philosophers had introduced a distinction between the intrinsic value of a discipline, that is to say the value in itself, and the instrumental value, choosing to focus on the latter, and recommending philosophy for helping with assessment of inferences. In the next presentation, Lawler, much more charismatically, referred to the distinction and then loudly said, "YOU MATTER!" to the audience, many of whom were students. It was a memorable move, but it eclipsed whatever he had to say about his discipline. Okay, being memorable is not an entirely good guide to value: a paper I cannot remember may sometimes be better than one I can, or a novel I cannot remember versus a novel I can. *L'intérieur supérieur*? But this eclipsing was a problem in this context I think. ("I can see what you are doing and it is really clever, but I can take some of it and increase the volume massively, metaphorically speaking, like this and then what is going to happen to you?" is not always a good move, I think.)

Also the idea that students matter and there is some intrinsic value connected with students can be accepted by quite different philosophies. An old-fashioned utilitarian might say, "YOU MATTER: we include your pleasure and pain in our calculations, regardless of colour, age, class, etc." But the utilitarian philosophy aims at the greatest happiness, understood in terms of more pleasure and less pain, and there is a well-known objection that this allows for killing one person if it makes many happy. The one person matters for the utilitarian in that their pain is included in the evaluation, but it is outweighed by the pleasure of many others.

And perhaps a Kantian who says, "You matter," and means that you are valuable in a way that never allows such sacrifice can argue like so: you matter, so your future matters, so you have to stop making these elementary mistakes and the least harmful way to prevent

them is to embarrass you out of them. Whoever sincerely says, “You have to be cruel to be kind,” probably thinks that you matter.

I feel it is unfair to evaluate these presentations in writing online, but if you wish to know my reaction, and I guess someone does (don’t take away the Internet for this!), it is the eclipsing worry and this worry that the slogan “YOU MATTER” can be appropriated by very different philosophies and corresponding policy systems.

Appendix

Further concerns about unbridgeable divides: I found this comment on Laura Valentini, which begins with:

Valentini is another case of pretty wrapping paper, and a pretty extreme one at that: shallow arguments on trendy topics, packaged to look groundbreaking. The fact that she's married to Christian List (LSE political theory prof) didn't hurt either.

I think her making a map of ideal theories was a good idea and that is one of her most well-known projects, but as I have argued there is further processing to do (e.g. Edward 2022a), so I would see the material as not at the pretty wrapping stage but at the ditch digging stage, or whatever the best metaphor for that horrible stage is. And either she did not get help from Christian List or conceptual analysis is not his strength.

References

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