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A Manifesto for the Humanities

“Only the educated are free.”
--Epictetus

Humanistic inquiry seeks to understand nothing less than the entirety of human experience, thought, and habitat. Humanists place human life itself under a critical lens and examine it in all of its diverse forms, from philosophical and religious structures of knowledge to artistic expressions of beauty to political and linguistic conceptions of society, as well as the transformation of these notions over the long course of history. Within these larger frameworks, we wrestle with notions of truth, belief, ethics, creativity, justice, democracy, freedom, and the conflicts that arise over these ideas. As a tradition of inquiry, the Humanities are expansive, and working within this tradition requires a mind that is capacious and bold enough to ask the kinds of questions for which there are rarely clear answers. Humanists are constantly grappling with ambiguity, and we cultivate a critical disposition that remains flexible and willing to embrace uncertainty because we live, and have always lived, and will always live, in an uncertain world. Within a Humanistic enterprise, “knowledge” is fluid rather than stable and absolute. Rather than despair over an ostensibly indeterminate and ever-shifting field of knowledge, Humanists derive a deep sense of pleasure and joy from collaborating with each other and taking intellectual risks in the pursuit of greater understanding. Humanists are dedicated to thinking through problems, despite how bewildering or unsolvable these problems may seem. We make claims and sustain arguments. We seek clarity, and we work toward this end together in the spirit of friendship and cooperation.

The Humanities are self-referential: we study how others have shaped their lives and in turn come to a greater understanding of how we might shape our own. We examine the thoughts, actions, and expressions of others so that we might enrich our own abilities to think, act, and communicate. This is the distinguishing feature of the Humanities: they provide the intellectual resources for living an examined life. A rigorous exploration of culture, art, politics, and language roots a Humanist's life in a narrative that is deeper and more meaningful than superficial materialism. An education in the Humanities is fundamentally existential insofar as it is an instruction in the act of living. Studying the humanities helps one develop the courage and integrity to think for oneself in the face of disagreement, opposition, oppression, calamity, terror, war, and empire. This is a tradition of thought that understands political freedom and individual autonomy to be the result not just of a growing economy but a growing mind that possesses the strength to resist the marketization of all value. The Humanities make such a life possible because at its core are a set of kindred traditions—philosophy, art and art history, classical studies, religious studies, literary studies, rhetoric, and history—that examine human life in all of its messy, magnificent, and surprising forms. It is the knowledge gleaned from these traditions that fortifies individuals and makes them resilient to coercive social pressures. The Humanities inspire radical non-conformity, curiosity, and courage in a culture that too often demands timidity, homogeneity and cupidity. By situating themselves within these traditions of thought, Humanists become empowered to tackle the biggest issues confronting the modern world as well as shape an

examined life that is rich with meaning because they recognize the full range of human value and potential.

The Humanities are about learning to put an examined life into practice. Students who study the Humanities bring into the world an eloquence and sophistication of thought informed and energized by the study of 2000 years of cultural expression. And the world needs the Humanities now more than ever. The most pressing global problems—climate change, poverty, extreme income disparity, global acts of terror, economic instability, food shortages, ineffectual ruling classes—do not have simple, black and white solutions. To confront these issues, students must have habits of mind that are flexible and can adapt and critically examine complicated and rapidly changing social realities. With their education in the Humanities, students are better able to make moral decisions in a morally ambiguous world; they act in ways that serve social justice and seek to invigorate a vital democratic spirit; they can effectively negotiate a globally integrated world with various, and at times conflicting, belief systems and practices. By connecting their critical writing, reading, and communication skills with their ability to think about local communities, global relations, and the politics, art, philosophies, languages, and cultures that compose the whole of human existence, students of the Humanities enter the world and their chosen vocations with a formidable set of capabilities and a mindset of inquiry. There is a seamless continuity between the abstract thinking of the classroom and real life demands of the job market. Humanities students do not merely bring training to their profession or a superficial set of skills. They bring the full weight of their humanity. An examined life is a precondition for collaborating with others in and outside the workplace. It is also, and perhaps even more importantly, a prerequisite to living courageously, selflessly, and in the service of the public good. Education is fundamentally about shaping a life, and the Humanities are what enable human beings to flourish.