

WHY SHOULD I LEARN THAT?



ESSAYS ON THE
IMPORTANCE OF LEARNING

KEVIN J.
BROWNE

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What should be taught?

This has become an important question for me as the father of an almost 2-year-old child. The world of education is filled with theories on what children need to learn and how best to teach them. I think we can safely say that we want our children to end up happy, healthy, well-adjusted, self-actualized, self-sufficient, contributing members of the human community. The question is how do we help them achieve these ends. In current terminology, what are our learning outcomes?

I dislike the "learning outcomes approach" in general because, among other things, it presumes that we can push the right buttons in our students and they will automatically respond. But, in reality, learning is each individual's responsibility and what educators can do best is set the stage and create supportive conditions for children to have the best chance of learning and succeeding in their education. Ideally, educators should be mentors.

But, even though there are problems with the outcomes approach to education, it does make sense to ask what some general goals should be for educating our children, whatever model we choose to foster these goals. I think some of the most important goals are as follows (I've placed the specific subjects from my curriculum in parentheses that seem to support the specified goal):

Creativity: The ability to be creative, in both one's

personal as well as professional life, is an important skill and one that too often seems to be educated out of children. To foster this skill it is important to expose children to many different forms of art as well different ways of thinking about things in general. This is one of those skills that can be easily incorporated into almost any subject but it can also too easily be overlooked to teach a specific subject in a specific orthodox way. (Art, Poetry, Plays, Thinking)

Problem Solving: One of the main reasons to foster creativity is to help improve problem-solving skills. This is a component that can also be easily integrated into almost any subject as an active part of learning. The emphasis here is on the application and use of knowledge as opposed to the mere acquisition of knowledge. (Math, Thinking)

Life Skills: By the term "life skills" I mean several different things. Certainly, this would include such areas as finance (i.e. saving/investing/debt management), time management, and cooking but it should also include interpersonal skills as well to foster the ability to get along with others, form lasting friendships, and romantic relationships, and work-related skills. (Life Skills)

Literacy: This involves the first two of the 3 R's: Reading and Writing. But I think literacy also involves good communication skills in general and so should include public speaking. Also, to be included in this broad area are

cultural literacy and familiarity with literature and language. (Language, Reading, and Writing)

Numeracy: The third of the 3 R's: Mathematics. But, numeracy entails something besides knowing the basics of algebra, geometry, and calculus. More importantly, it involves having a good sense of numbers, being able to understand and use statistics, and having a good handle on practical everyday math. (Mathematics, Thinking)

Self-Learning: Ideally, learning is not something that stops once a child finishes school and graduates. Learning is a life-long process and one that is largely in the hands of each individual. The best we can offer to our children is a set of good learning skills such as those mentioned above and broad exposure to the basics of human knowledge. Along with this, we should cultivate in them the ability to learn on their own since we cannot hope to teach them everything they will ever need to know in their lifetime. We can get them started and encourage them to keep learning but where they end up and what they need to know to get there is to some extent out of our hands.

Having said that, I think the case can be made that some specific subjects ought to be taught as a way of fostering these general skills and broadening our children's horizons.

The Utility of Learning

Before I begin this series on the importance of learning various subjects in common course curricula, I thought it might be useful to pause a moment to ponder on the connection between utility and learning. The question "When am I ever going to use this?" is the bane of every teacher's existence. What it implies is that the only things worth learning are those that will be used. I will be arguing in the forthcoming series that you can make a utility-related argument for every major subject in the curriculum but what if you couldn't make such an argument? What if a particular subject such as history or music or philosophy had no use? Is it no longer worth learning?

There are several problems with using utility as the sole criterion to determine what ought to be taught and what ought to be learned. First, there are other good reasons to learn most anything. Second, there is no way to predict what specific subject or part of a subject will be useful to someone in the future with any accuracy.

Why should we only be interested in learning useful things? As the physicist Richard Feynman noted, a sufficient reason for learning is simply "the pleasure of finding things out." So what if you don't use what you've just learned? It is simply inherently enjoyable to learn new things, or it should be. While not everyone will enjoy learning the same things if you find no joy in learning something new independent of whether you will use the

knowledge this is not a problem with the subject matter itself but may be a problem with your attitude towards learning. By emphasizing utility we have trained students to only value that which has immediate and obvious utility and this is a mistake since it deprives them of this joy of learning.

To say that the only things worth learning are those with utility implies that we can know with certainty what will be useful. While this may be true in the short term, it becomes more difficult to judge the utility of a subject the farther ahead and more long-term we look. As another physicist, Niels Bohr, once said "prediction is difficult, especially about the future." We really can't know what specific subjects or parts of subjects will be useful in the future. If we only teach what seems practical and useful in the present we are surely robbing ourselves of useful insights and learning that will serve us well in the future.

But, I can hear the criticism from some already. Some subjects have never been useful to anyone. Some things are just pointless to learn. I hesitate to list what some of these subjects might be but perhaps you already have one or two in mind. If so, I invite you to join me over the next dozen or so blog posts as I try to lay out the case for every major subject being important to learn. I will be focusing mostly on utility but I hope to have shown here that there is no reason to concede the argument for learning something just because it has no obvious or immediate utility.

The Importance of Art



Art is often the first subject to be cut when budget constraints loom and this is likely because it seems less central to learning. After all, what practical values are served by learning art?

As I tell students in my philosophy courses, many subjects have an indirect value to education. That is, while learning the subject matter may not seem practical, the act of learning itself is valuable. For most courses, though it is possible to determine direct as well as indirect values so let's look at art in this light.

By art, I mean the visual, plastic arts such as painting and sculpture. I'll be writing about music and literature in later posts. The importance of learning about these arts is not only in studying past works but in practicing art as well. Why could learning about these arts be valuable?

In her book titled *Visual Intelligence: Sharpen Your Perception, Change Your Life*, Amy Herman argues that studying art increases your powers of perception. We often assume that perception is a passive activity that works like a camera. We look at a scene or image and see exactly what is there.

In reality, perception is a complex process guided in part by our previous experiences as well as our expectations about what we will see. As demonstrated by this famous video we all too often don't see what is right in front of our eyes:



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If you missed seeing something when you watched this you might benefit from the lessons in Herman's book. Among her many useful insights, she discusses the fact that no two people see the same thing, an important insight in many areas of life beyond the study of art.

She also addresses concrete ways that art can help you improve your observational skills, help you see and share hard truths, overcome your inherent biases, and navigate uncertainty.

Additionally, there are other benefits to studying art including improving one's skills in abstraction, imagination, and creativity.

Abstraction: For much art, even representational art, learning to appreciate it encourages the ability to reason in the abstract since art involves the use of symbols to convey concepts.

Imagination: Studying art can also improve one's imagination. While studying past works of art helps improve one's ability to reason in the abstract, practicing art helps fire the imagination.

Creativity: Related to this is the benefit of improving one's creativity. One of the central values of any education is fostering creativity. Not only is this a vital skill in your work life but it is also one of life's important values.



But, still, one can ask “What is the practical value of improving one’s abstraction, imagination, and creativity?”

Art allows us the opportunity to see the world in new ways with minimal risk. We can try out new options, new perspectives, and new ways of approaching life and its problems in a risk-free space. As Morse Peckham points out in his book *Man’s Rage For Chaos: Biology, Behavior, and the Arts*, “art is a rehearsal for the orientation that makes innovation possible.” In a world driven by information and innovation, what could be more practical?

Of course, we don’t want to focus on the practical to the exclusion of other reasons for learning about art. The most important reason to learn about art might simply be to appreciate beauty in all its different forms. Even if studying art had no practical value at all, it would still be worth studying for this reason alone.

There is inherent value in studying art, as well as all the other subjects I'll be discussing whether or not there are any further practical benefits to the study. After all, life should not entirely be concerned with practical applications!

I recommend reading:

Amy Herman *Visual Intelligence: Sharpen Your Perception, Change Your Life*

Alain de Botton *Art as Therapy*

Alberto Manguel *Reading Pictures: A History of Love and Hate*

The Importance of Astronomy



At some time nearly everyone looks up at the sky in wonder. There are so many stars, galaxies, and empty space. Are we alone? Could other planets be teeming with life like the Earth? Did everything really begin with a Big Bang? So many questions without clear answers. Are there benefits to studying astronomy even if such questions cannot be answered? Let's look at it.

“Do not look at stars as bright spots only. Try to take in the vastness of the universe.” Maria Mitchell

Questions such as the ones listed above should seem important in and of themselves whether or not the answers are easily found or whether the answers have any practical significance. The study of such questions seems to be a deeply human exercise and one worth the time and effort. But, there are also more tangible benefits to learning about astronomy.

In their book titled, *Astronomical Mindfulness, Your Cosmic Guide to Reconnecting with the Sun, Moon, Stars, and Planets*, Christopher De Pree and Sarah Scoles discuss several benefits to studying astronomy, not to pass an exam but for more personal reasons. They point out that in being more astronomically mindful, “you breath easier. You feel calmer.” And, learning some astronomy “will help you be more mindful about your presence in the universe.”

Perspective: Sometimes our problems seem so immense and, our accomplishments so outstanding. Our importance as humans is taken as a given. But, contemplating the universe and its origins helps to put our own lives into perspective. We needn’t feel any less proud of what we’ve accomplished or feel that our lives have less meaning in the face of such contemplation. However, sometimes it is useful to contemplate something larger than ourselves and consider how we fit into it. What could be a more appropriate subject for such contemplation than the universe?

“Astronomy taught us our insignificance in Nature.” Ralph Waldo Emerson

Orientation: Closely related to perspective, knowing where you are and how you relate to others is of fundamental importance. Certainly orienting yourself in the larger context of the solar system, galaxy, and universe completes this process. In *Astronomical Mindfulness*, De

Pree and Scoles provide activities to help orient you in relation to what you observe in the night sky.

Understanding: Our attempts to discover the origin of the universe have also contributed to our understanding of the fundamental nature of reality which is, at least partly, explained by two major scientific theories: relativity and quantum mechanics. Each of these theories provides surprising, and surprisingly useful, insights into how the world we inhabit works.

Exploration: Our fundamental human drive to explore can be satisfied, if only indirectly, by studying the solar system, our own galaxy, and the universe as a whole. There will likely be people landing on Mars in our lifetimes or the lifetime of our children. We are already exploring other planets of our solar system in-depth with several orbiters and probes. An understanding of astronomy allows us to appreciate the knowledge those spacecraft bring back to Earth.

“To confine our attention to terrestrial matters would be to limit the human spirit.” Stephen Hawking

The very rhythm of our days, months, and years is set by what happens in the world that astronomy explores. Recognizing this and understanding it fulfills our fundamental human need to explore, understand, and satisfy curiosity. Observing the movements of the moon and stars puts us in touch with something larger than

ourselves, forces us to re-orient our perspective and sense of time, and in the busy, hurried, stressful world in which we live, such values are important to remember and cultivate in a way that studying astronomy uniquely facilitates.

I recommend reading:

Christopher De Pree & Sarah Scoles *Astronomical Mindfulness, Your Cosmic Guide to Reconnecting with the Sun, Moon, Stars, and Planets*

Stephen Hawking *The Universe in a Nutshell*

Carl Sagan *Cosmos*

The Importance of Biology



In the study of life, an understanding of biology is critical to many areas of our lives including our health and well-being. In addition to this, understanding biology allows us to appreciate what Richard Dawkins calls “the greatest show on Earth:” evolution. In addition to some standard reasons for studying biology, I want to examine some other values that biology helps foster.

“There’s biology in everything, even when you’re feeling spiritual.” Helen Fisher

The study of biology is a formal expression of what the biologist Edward O. Wilson termed “biophilia,” our innate tendency to seek out a connection with nature and other living organisms. Understanding the basic principles of biology can deepen this connection we share with nature.

Health: A common argument for studying biology is that it helps us understand how to improve our health and diet. No doubt this is a good reason and the most practical one to examine. What could be more important as a basis for living a good life than being reasonably healthy?

Closely related to this is the realization that being in nature itself is good for our health. In *The Nature Fix: Why Nature Makes Us Happier, Healthier, and More Creative*, Florence Williams chronicles the studies that show how nature is good for our health. Appreciating that evidence requires an understanding of the basic principles of biology.

In the book, Williams discusses scientific studies which show the many benefits of spending time in nature. One of the more interesting studies has shown that hospital patients who have rooms with a view of nature outside their windows have shorter recovery times than patients without such a view. Clearly, there are health benefits to being in nature and an understanding of biology can enhance your understanding of that connection.

Interdependence: Life on Earth is interdependent in many different ways from predator and prey to symbiosis. Studying biology places us firmly into this interdependent web of life.

Biology is, in part, about connections. All life on Earth is connected. Indeed, at a fundamental level, all life on Earth is related. Human beings sometimes see themselves as separate from the natural world, isolated and insulated from what happens in nature. The study of biology shows us that

this is not the case. We are part of the biosphere. Understanding that is crucial to preserving it and ourselves.

An excellent resource to introduce this interconnectedness to young children is Misa Maynerick Blaise's book *This Phenomenal Life: The Amazing Ways We Are Connected With Our Universe*. In the book, she discusses how much of our DNA we share with plants and animals. In another interesting example of close connections, she points out that "the structure of a chlorophyll molecule is nearly identical to a human hemoglobin molecule. The only difference is the atom in the middle of each molecule. In plants, it is magnesium, whereas in humans it is iron."

Ingenuity: The demands of survival in the wild lead to some pretty ingenious strategies in plants and animals. Mimicry, camouflage, the myriad ways that plants and animals adapt to their environment. Not only are these amazing and interesting to learn about but can potentially inspire human problem solving as well.

Endurance: Life thrives in the most unlikely places from deep in the ocean, hidden in dark caves, freezing and near-boiling water. All demonstrate the endurance of life. As the Jeff Goldblum character in Jurassic Park said, "life finds a way." Again, not only is this immensely interesting to learn about, it can be inspirational as well. No matter how difficult our lives seem and how insurmountable our problems appear, there is always a way to endure and prevail.

Evolution: One of the most important, not to mention well-tested and observed theories in science is the theory of

evolution by natural selection. Understanding this theory is a major step in anyone's education as it is often counterintuitive and not immediately obvious or easily observable in the short period of human life. But, understanding it ought to be a major goal of the study of biology and is a rewarding pursuit. As Darwin recognized, "There is grandeur in this view of life." What better argument for studying biology than the appreciation of such grandeur and an understanding of our place in it.

"But if, before you die, you want to understand why you lived in the first place, Darwinism is the one subject that you must study." John Maynard Smith

Evolution itself can teach us an important life lesson. The best image of this is provided by Richard Dawkins in his book *Climbing Mount Improbable*. In it he relates the parable of Mount Improbable: "Mount Improbable rears up from the plain, lofting its peaks dizzily to the rarefied sky. The towering, vertical cliffs of Mount Improbable can never, it seems, be climbed. Dwarfed like insects, thwarted mountaineers crawl and scrabble along the foot, gazing hopelessly at the sheer, unattainable heights. They shake their tiny, baffled heads and declare the brooding summit forever unscalable.

"Our mountaineers are too ambitious. So intent are they on the perpendicular drama of the cliffs, they do not think to look round the other side of the mountain. There they would find not vertical cliffs and echoing canyons but gently inclined grassy meadows graded steadily and easily towards distant uplands... The sheer height of the peak doesn't matter, so long as you don't try to scale it in a

single bound. Locate the mildly sloping path and, if you have unlimited time, the ascent is only as formidable as the next step. The story of Mount Improbable is, of course, a parable.”

What can the parable teach us? Perhaps the lesson is that for every problem there is a solution. Perhaps the lesson is that by taking small steps towards our goals we will eventually succeed. Perhaps the lesson is one of perseverance in the face of seemingly impossible challenges. Perhaps there are other lessons.

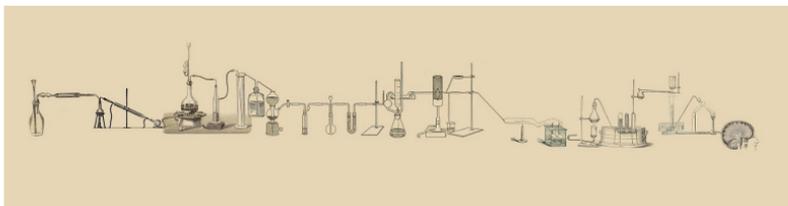
I recommend reading:

Florence Williams *The Nature Fix: Why Nature Makes Us Happier, Healthier, and More Creative*

Wallace Nichols *Blue Mind: The Surprising Science That Shows How Being near, in, on, or Under Water Can Make You Happier, Healthier, More Connected, and Better at What You Do*

Richard Dawkins *The Greatest Show on Earth: The Evidence for Evolution*

The Importance of Chemistry



I remember as a kid being very bored in chemistry class. A few experiments here and there and a mountain of equations somehow could not compel me to have curiosity for molecules and chemical reactions. How unfortunate. Chemistry is not only fascinating to study and practice but important as well. It is a window into the foundations of biology and physics and can provide insights both practical and interesting.

“Wonder is the heaviest element on the periodic table. Even a tiny fleck of it stops time.” Diane Ackerman

Foundations: At the core of both biology and physics is chemistry since this science addresses how molecules interact and connect. Any understanding of how things work in the world, both organic and inorganic eventually comes down to chemistry. Of course, this begs the question, why should anyone care about understanding how things work in the world at all?

Health: One reason to care about understanding is that it is good for our health. What we eat, how it is cooked, and how it is digested are all functions of chemistry, and

understanding the chemistry involved is an important step towards taking charge of one's own health.

Connections: Chemistry is about how molecules connect and interact but can chemistry give us any insight into our human and social connections? Perhaps. Often in chemical reactions, the result is much different in composition than the original inputs. Dangerous elements can mix to create beneficial molecules; salt is a good example of this. Unexpected results are a part of connections in life as well. Benefits come from such connections all of the time.

“Chemistry begins in the stars. The stars are the source of the chemical elements, which are the building blocks of matter and the core of our subject.” Peter Atkins

There are so many practical benefits to the study of chemistry it is hard to provide a broad overview in such a short space. But, if you think about it nearly every part of your life is related in some way to chemistry. What you wear, eat, drive, where you live, the air you breathe, what medicines you take. All of these areas of your life where you have to make decisions would be enhanced by some working knowledge of chemistry. So, take a look around and see how your life is touched by chemistry and begin to study these areas on a molecular level. You never know what you might learn and what connections you might make!

In schools, chemistry is often taught as a course without a history. You learn the elements, the formulas, the theories but you never hear the stories behind them. That's unfortunate because chemistry is the story of human

invention, intrigue, and drama. Three books illustrate this very well and hearing these stories might inspire me to learn more about the elements, formulas, and theories.

Sam Kean *The Disappearing Spoon: And Other Tales of Madness, Love, and the History of the World From The Periodic Table of the Elements*

John Emsley *The 13th Element: The Sordid Tale of Murder, Fire, and Phosphorus*

Simon Garfield *Mauve: How One Man Invented a Color That Changed The World*

The Importance of Economics



Surely one of the easier subjects to show the importance of is economics. Yet, while it has obvious practical benefits it seems to be rarely taught well or with an eye towards understanding fundamental principles or how they apply in the real world. Economics courses seem to be heavily skewed towards explaining theory but not practice. That is when such courses are taught at all which is often not the case in primary and secondary schools. No wonder people's money management skills are often so poor.

Money Management: Of course, this is the main practical benefit of learning about economics. While the study of economics, in and of itself, will not make you wealthy, failing to learn and apply basic principles of saving and investing will surely keep you poor. Millions of people were raised to believe, and many still do believe, that investing is nothing more than gambling and no more reliable as a way to build wealth and financial security than buying lottery tickets. Still more believe that credit cards represent free money and have already spent their next raise without ever seeing the money. The study of economics is a good first step towards fixing some of these

problems both in one's personal life and in our nation which also suffers from poor economic thinking and planning.

Value: The notion of value is important both in economics and life in general. The economist Thomas Sowell points out that many people wrongly criticize economics by pointing out that there are also such things as “non-economic values,” to which he responds by saying that of course there are non-economic values. There are only non-economic values. Economics is not a value itself but a way of determining the costs and benefits of trading one value for another.

Trade-Offs: The notion of trade-offs is a difficult one for many to accept. In a complex world, we often want simple solutions but as often as not there are no solutions to problems at all, only trade-offs. We can spend more money on groceries only if we are willing to spend less on shoes. We drive safer by slowing down only if we are willing to spend more time on the road. Many areas of life involve such trade-offs and economics provides a method for thinking through how to make these trade-offs in the best way possible.

Planning: In *Basic Economics*, Thomas Sowell writes about his experience as an undergraduate in economics: “When I was an undergraduate studying economics under Professor Arthur Smithies of Harvard, he asked me in class one day what policy I favored on a particular issue of the times. Since I had strong feelings on that issue, I proceeded to answer him with enthusiasm, explaining what beneficial consequences I expected from the policy I advocated.

“And then what will happen,” he asked.

The question caught me off guard. However, as I thought about it, it became clear that the situation I described would lead to other economic consequences, which I then began to consider and spell out.

“And then what will happen after that?” Professor Smithies asked.”

This continued for several more rounds until: “By now I was beginning to see that the economic reverberations of the policy I advocated were likely to be pretty disastrous and in fact, much worse than the initial situation that it was designed to improve.”

The world is filled with such examples of the failure to think things through beyond the first stage. As the economist Bastiat pointed out, good economists see beyond the visible consequences of their actions to the less visible and unintended consequences. While not immediately visible itself, this is one of the most important benefits of the study of economics.

I recommend reading:

Henry Hazlitt *Economics in One Lesson: The Shortest & Surest Way to Understand Economics*

Thomas Sowell *Basic Economics: A Common Sense Guide to the Economy*

Mark Skousen *Economics on Trial: Lies, Myths, and Realities*

The Importance of Ethics



The case for teaching ethics really comes down to what Aristotle said. The person who acts virtuously is simply happier in their life. Recent studies in psychology bear this out. People who lie, cheat, and steal are rarely if ever happy, and happy people who do not seem as tempted to lie, cheat, and steal. Aside from being happier here are a few other benefits to the study of ethics.

Empathy: A core principle in nearly every ethical theory taught in philosophy and nearly every moral code in human cultures is empathy. Having a genuine concern for others and being able to put yourself in their shoes is not only an important ethical principle but a useful life skill.

Virtue: This concept seems outdated but is an important part of most moral codes even if it is called something else. The basic idea here is that there are a core set of principles that it is good for one to have and act on such as honesty, friendship, and contemplation. The last two were among the most important for Aristotle and though not often thought of as ethical principles are important to a happy life. The point comes back to the one made above. Why should one know about ethics and act according to ethical principles? Because it leads to a happier life.

In James Rachels' insightful book *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* he sums up the importance of learning about ethical theories by focusing on the following points:

Modesty: Human beings have trouble with this one sometimes as we think we're the most important creation in the universe. But, given the history of that universe and our relative recent arrival, Rachels suggests that a little modesty is in order. Another factor involved in this is the simple fact that we do not know nearly as much as we think we do or think we should about the world in which we live. The biologist Lewis Thomas is particularly eloquent on this subject pointing out that biologists don't even know fully how a cell works! Our ignorance is much greater than our knowledge in almost every field we study: physics, psychology, biology, cosmology, and yes philosophy too. This has inspired some thinkers to advocate a provisional theory in ethics.

Reason: The importance of reason in morality cannot be overstated. Given the normative element involved, we need good justification based on reason to back up our moral

judgments and imperatives. Our struggle in ethics has been to reason in a consistent logical way. Furthermore, reason requires us to act impartially. That is, if a particular fact justifies acting in one case, then we must accept that the same fact would justify the same action in similar cases. We also must be able to recognize that some reasons are not relevant to justify differences in treatment.

Desert: The general notion involved here is to treat people as they deserve to be treated. This is illustrated in Immanuel Kant's principle of respect and Thomas Hobbes' social contract. People deserve to be treated with a minimum level of respect and dignity but people who knowingly harm others deserve punishment as well.

Motives: We need to evaluate our actions, in part, according to what is motivating them. Clearly, an action is better if our motive is to help someone as opposed to being only self-serving. Focusing on motivation is important because it helps explain why impartiality does not always apply. We are motivated to act towards our friends, parents, and children differently than strangers and this is appropriate. One cannot always act according to the principle of utility which demands that we act to maximize the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Nor should we always act this way. We have to balance our competing motives towards ourselves, our loved ones, our communities, and so on.

Consequences: Of course, this is not to deny the importance of consequences in our actions. We ought to strive to make the consequences of our actions as good as possible. Rachels advocates what he refers to as "multiple

strategies utilitarianism.” Here the standard is not simply the abstract principle of utility but that principle combined with the more personal considerations of motive and desert. “What is important is that people be as happy and well-off as possible.”

In economics, this is often referred to as the Pareto Optimum after the Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto. The basic idea is that we should strive to reach a state where everyone is as well off as possible without making anyone worse off in the process. It’s a pretty high standard to achieve but perhaps worth using as the ideal. The important point about multiple strategies utilitarianism is that we recognize that there may be many ways of achieving the ideal and at different times, different strategies are necessary to achieve the result. Sometimes focusing on our own concerns is the appropriate course of action, while at other times our actions should be more selfless.

Community: We don’t live on islands to ourselves and our actions take place within a moral community. The Greeks recognized this and defined the self in large part in relation to the community: the polis. From this concept, we get our word politics. This word often has a negative connotation but the basic point seems valid that morality exists within a communal setting and as the political commentator George Will eloquently puts it “statecraft is soulcraft.” Of course, Thomas Hobbes also recognized the importance of community as providing a rational justification for our entering into a social contract as a basis for our morality. As Rachels puts it “we ought to be concerned about everyone whose welfare might be affected by what we do.” A tall order but given that our actions do affect others we ought to

be cognizant of that and work to make the effects as positive as possible.

Justice and Fairness: These subjects have received increasing attention in the 20th century due in large part to books like the late John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* written in 1971 and Robert Nozick's response to that book written in 1974 titled *Anarchy State and Utopia*. Of course, concern for justice and fairness is not a new thing in ethics but we saw how utilitarianism did fail to take these important concepts into account. Kant saw his theory of retributivism as a corrective to this shortcoming at least in the area of punishment. Fairness relates as well to our recurring emphasis on impartiality and has many practical implications not only in the justice system but also in the workplace.

The study of ethics can also help answer some very basic but important questions about how the world works including:

What makes an action right or wrong?

Who decides what is right and wrong?

Does everyone have different morals?

There is much that we now know thanks to the study of evolutionary psychology about the answers to these questions. This information is quite interesting and useful. Ethics is something that should be taught starting at a young age but parents who are ill-informed about the basic principles of ethics will have a harder time passing on useful knowledge to their children and providing answers

to these important questions. If for no other reason than to benefit your children the study of ethics should be seen as an important priority in your education.

I recommend reading:

James Rachels *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*

Patricia Churchland *Braintrust: What Neuroscience Tells Us about Morality*

Michael Shermer *The Moral Arc: How Science and Reason Lead Humanity Toward Truth, Justice, and Freedom*

The Importance of Geology & Geography



For many people, the study of geology is just about looking at rocks and the study of geography is nothing more than memorizing state capitals to be forgotten later on. While it is interesting to identify rocks and useful to be able to remember capitals, there are other reasons to study geology and geography.

We live in a world where information travels at the speed of light and what happens on the other side of the globe (both natural and political) affects us. And we all know the statistics regarding the poor knowledge young people have related to geography:

-Only 37% of young Americans can find Iraq on a map — though U.S. troops have been there since 2003.

-6 in 10 young Americans don't speak a foreign language fluently.

-20% of young Americans think Sudan is in Asia. (It's the largest country in Africa.)

-48% of young Americans believe the majority population in India is Muslim. (It's Hindu — by a landslide.)

-Half of young Americans can't find New York on a map.

This ignorance has profoundly negative consequences. But, I want to argue that there are bigger reasons for studying these sciences.

Perspective: Taking a wider perspective can be very useful and the study of geography encourages us to do this with regard to space. The study of geology reminds us to have perspective on time. We often think that what happens in our little corner of the world at a particular time is all-important but the world is much larger and time much longer than the framework in which we ordinarily conceive of things. Adopting a larger view of time and space can be useful.

“Civilization exists by geological consent, subject to change without notice.” Will Durant

Orientation: We need to orient ourselves both literally and figuratively in the world in which we live. As Jared Diamond points out in his book *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*, much of our history turns on the contingencies of geology and geography. We inhabit a world of forces much larger than ourselves and these have a profound effect on our life and well-being. Thus, some understanding of these forces helps us to appreciate our history and our future.

“Without geography, you're nowhere.” Author unknown

Incremental Change: Throughout geological history, profound changes have occurred by the slow and deliberate processes of nature. Simple wind and water erosion formed the Grand Canyon. What can we learn from this? The power of small steps consistently taken yields large effects. This is abundantly true and nature and in our own lives. Slow and steady wins the race.

Personally, it took me some time to warm up to the study of geology. My sister was an avid amateur geologist and tried to spark the passion in me but it did not take hold until much later and even then in a much weaker form. But, I hope to rectify that with my daughter and teach her to appreciate the natural world by instilling in her an understanding of the powerful processes at work in the natural world.

Knowing where you are going is not possible unless you know where you are and where you came from, This is true of history which I will discuss in my next post but equally true of the sciences of geology and geography. For that reason, their study should be a part of any good education.

I recommend reading:

Simon Winchester *The Map That Changed The World: William Smith and the Birth of Modern Geology*

Marcia Bjornerud *Timefulness: How Thinking Like a Geologist Can Help Save the World*

Jared Diamond *Guns, Germs, & Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*

The Importance of History



On the 50th anniversary of D-Day I wrote an essay titled “IS D-Day Worth Remembering?” I hoped to provide an argument for the importance of learning history sufficiently motivating to cause students to act on it. I’m not sure I succeeded. But, the question is still valid to ask about any event of historical significance. If you feel some discomfort at the question this is likely because you recognize that the answer is yes, such events are worth remembering and it’s unfortunate to have to provide an argument for this. If you don’t think such historical events are worth remembering, please read on for more reasons to study history.

Orientation: As I noted in the essay on geology and geography if you don’t know where you are, you don’t know where you’re going. This is true of history as well. If you don’t know where you came from, you can’t know where you’re going. History provides the context for where

we each start our journey in life. Others have come before us and have set the stage for us. Failing to understand this impedes our ability to fully engage in life.

“To be ignorant of what occurred before you were born is to remain always a child.” Cicero

Experience: As Sir Isaac Newton once said “if I have seen further than most it is because I have stood on the shoulders of giants.” This perfectly captures the importance of studying history no matter what your interests are. Every field of study and every human occupation has a history and has its giants. You can benefit from their experience and learn from their mistakes. You don’t have to reinvent the wheel. Others have done it and it is easy to forget this without studying the past. We can benefit from the experience of those who came before us, even as we benefit from the experience of those who have been on the job longer than us at work. They know the ropes because they were there before us. History is nothing more than the study of those who were there before us and know the ropes.

Commonality: We tend to think that people in the past were very different from us and superficially this is true. This is what causes some to dismiss the argument made above from experience. Those who lived in the past had different technology, different housing, ate different food, and wore different clothes. But, in the areas of life that count, there is a strong bond of commonality which transcends time. People in the past had the same concerns about life, the same emotions of love and hate, the same ultimate questions and problems. Their solutions often

differed but we can learn something of value by understanding their similarities as well as their differences.

Drama: To students who say history is boring I ask: Is life today boring? If you answer no, then remember this. What students in the future will study as history is your life today. What would you say to them if they said that their history was boring? In truth, history is the study of the drama of human life and that drama is no less interesting for having happened in the past than it is now. If you think history is boring this means you have not been studying history but rather a school textbook version of history that bears little resemblance to the real thing.

Remembering: Finally, I want to argue that the act of remembering in and of itself is a sufficient reason to study history. If you have a relative who fought in a war, helped others in some way in their work, created something artistic, devoted themselves to public service, or was simply a good role model to their family, isn't this person worth remembering? Don't we dishonor them by not remembering? But, in a larger sense, everyone fits into one of the categories above.

In a practical sense, we cannot truly remember every single person who has come before us. But, history provides us a way of remembering even those whose names we no longer know. History is worth remembering because it involved so many people just like you and me who made their contributions and lived their lives without any thought of what future generations might think about them. They did their jobs, loved their families, made names for themselves (or not), and the very least we owe them is some act of

remembering. Even if this involves nothing more than the study of history.

I recommend reading:

Roman Krznaric *How Should We Live? Great Ideas From the Past For Everyday Life*

Steven Johnson *How We Got to Now: Six Innovations that Made the Modern World*

James Burke *The Day The Universe Stood Still*

The Importance of Literature



“Fictional characters behave according to the same psychological probabilities as real people. But the characters of fiction are found in exotic dilemmas that real people hardly encounter. Consequently, fiction provides us with the opportunity to ponder how people react in uncommon situations, and to deduce moral lessons, psychological principles, and philosophical insights from their behavior.”

J.R. McCuen and A.C. Winkler

I first ran across this quote in an introductory logic textbook as an example of an argument. It is precisely the argument I want to advance here for the importance of studying literature. Like all art, literature in the form of novels, plays, and even poetry gives us a chance to rehearse scenarios and address ultimate life questions. We can work

through moral dilemmas, grief, death, love, and other human emotions and dramas and find lessons to apply to everyday life.

Narrative: We often learn better by reading and telling stories than simply trying to learn facts out of context. This is why it is best to learn history as a narrative. Unfortunately, history textbooks do not read well as stories. With literature, we have a ready-made vehicle to learn about the past entertainingly and engagingly.

Ethics: One of the best ways to discuss ethics is to use real-world examples and case studies. But, like history textbooks, these can often be dry and not very engaging. They also force us to examine complex issues without appealing to the real-world complexity and context of a given situation. Interestingly enough, good literature can provide this complexity and context even though the characters and situations described are not real. In this context, we can use literature to examine problems in ethics and possible solutions to moral dilemmas. Studies also suggest that reading great literature can improve one's empathy which is an important moral virtue.

Problem Solving: In a more general sense, literature provides us with a vehicle for exercising problem-solving skills. Even though fictional characters do end up in "exotic dilemmas," they are often not entirely dissimilar from our own dilemmas and though I am not arguing that we ought to do as fictional characters do, we can often learn something from the insights that can be gained in the study of literature. Even if we learn what not to do this can be a valuable lesson.

Role Models: Literature provides us with a wide array of characters to study and many of these can be used as good role models. Like real people, fictional characters (at least those in good literature) are often flawed but this allows us to explore the full complexity of humanity as we decide which role models to emulate and which to avoid. Even the best real-life heroes have traits we ought to avoid.

Students often ask why they are required to study past works of fiction that seem irrelevant to their life today. But, the best works of literature are still read and studied precisely because they contain characters and lessons that are timeless. Reading only recent and “relevant” works denies us the opportunity to learn from a wide range of sources and limits our scope to only what we can see immediately before us. But, the world is a much larger place, both geographically and historically. Literature provides an entertaining way to learn this lesson and can be a window onto many other important subjects in the curriculum. It can also show us how these subjects connect and influence life. With all of these benefits, it is well worth studying the great works of literature.

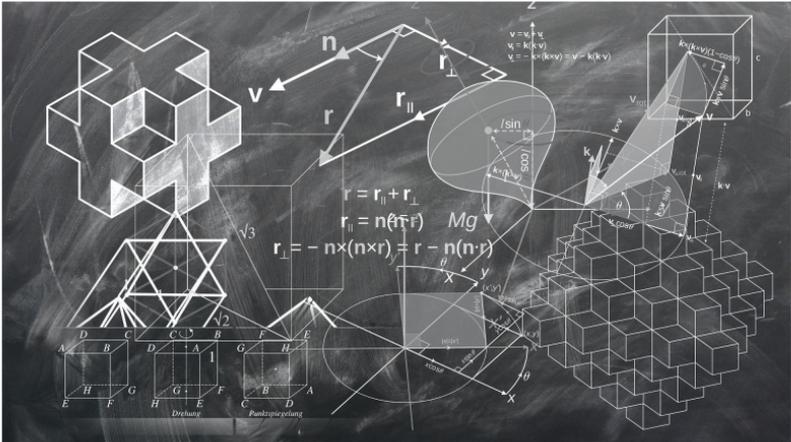
I recommend reading:

Great literature, the classics, recent works, a wide variety of stories from a wide variety of authors.

Susan Wise Bauer *The Well-Educated Mind: A Guide to the Classical Education You Never Had*

Thomas Foster *How to Read Literature Like a Professor: A Lively and Entertaining Guide to Reading Between the Lines*

The Importance of Mathematics



While it's relatively easy to argue for the importance of studying mathematics, it is unfortunate to have to. But, the fact remains that in some cases a majority of college students enter their freshman year needing some remedial mathematics courses. This indicates that they are not getting a good math education in high school and probably also means they are not being shown the importance of learning math. This is all the more unfortunate as the job market continues to develop more and more jobs where math skills are in demand. Even in the information age, where information is usually taken to mean verbal or written communication, mathematics still ranks as an important skill set.

“There should be no such thing as boring mathematics.”
Edsger W. Dijkstra

Everyday Use: The most obvious argument for studying math is that it has many everyday uses. Calculating percentages, balancing a checkbook, and calculating areas are just a few skills everyone needs virtually every day of their lives. Unfortunately, such applied math skills are sorely lacking even in students with good grades in high school math courses. The philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras recognized that numbers are an integral part of every life and that has never been more true than today.

Numeracy: One of the most important aspects of studying math is gaining what mathematician John Allen Paulos calls numeracy, defined as a general familiarity with numbers or having a good sense of numbers. This is quite different from being skilled in everyday uses of math though the two are connected. Being numerate involves such skills as estimation and a firm grasp of statistical principles and how to apply them. Being numerate also involves being able to see the connections between numbers and aspects of life not immediately obvious and not often taught in math classes. What does the population of a city tell you about how many restaurants there are or the chances of finding a good used bookstore?

“Mathematics is not about numbers, equations, computations, or algorithms: it is about understanding.”
William Paul Thurston

Universality: In many areas of life people tend to be relativists despite the many problems with this view, especially in the realm of ethics. But, the study of mathematics can be a good antidote to this relativism as it shows that certain universal principles govern how the

world works and how we can understand it which are independent of culture or opinion. In mathematics, the same principles apply wherever you happen to live.

“Mathematics knows no races or geographic boundaries; for mathematics, the cultural world is one country.” David Hilbert

Foundations: Perhaps for reasons connected with the points made above about universal rules, Plato advised that before studying philosophy and ethics students in his Academy first master the principles of mathematics and geometry. Pythagoras believed that everything consisted of numbers and to the extent that we can quantify a wide range of phenomena both physical and social this is true. Mathematics is the foundation of physics, chemistry, and most other hard sciences. Through the use of statistics, it can also be seen as an integral part of such soft sciences as sociology and economics. To fully understand the principles of these disciplines requires a good working knowledge of mathematics.

“Go down deep enough into anything and you will find mathematics.” Dean Schlicter

More than any other area in the curriculum, with the possible exception of history, how math is taught has led to the problem of mathematical illiteracy. Unless we begin teaching mathematics to help students master everyday use and gain numeracy as well as see the connections and foundations of math in other disciplines we will continue to struggle in a world more driven by math than ever. Ultimately, students will grow into adults who see first-

hand the costs of this illiteracy in their shrinking income, investments, and savings. Perhaps those numbers will motivate the drive towards improved math literacy!

I recommend reading:

John Allen Paulos *Innumeracy: Mathematical Illiteracy and its Consequences*

Marcus du Sautoy *Thinking Better: The Art of the Shortcut in Math and Life*

Ian Stewart *Why Beauty is Truth: A History of Symmetry*

The Importance of Music



Among the first subjects to be cut in schools are art and music. These cuts are often based on the belief that these subjects can be sacrificed without much damage to a student's development or academic success. But, more and more research shows that this is not the case. While the Mozart Effect, claiming an increase in IQ points when children are exposed to classical music, has been largely debunked, there are still good reasons to study music. Let's consider some of these.

Applied Academics: One benefit is that music is a great way to show a fun application of other academic subjects such as mathematics, physics, history, and geography. Given the general interest in music that most children have,

it can be used as a window into other subjects that are not as immediately interesting for students.

Cognitive Benefits: While the Mozart Effect may not be reliable, there are tangible cognitive developmental benefits to studying music. Surely one of these is an increase in creativity. Other benefits include an increase in attention span and quantitative ability. Music does activate various parts of the brain and this increased activity has positive benefits. Music rewards close attention to detail, form, structure, and organization all of which are beneficial in many other areas of life.

“Without music, life would be a blank to me.” Jane Austen

Rhythm: An important part of music is the element of rhythm and many children relate to music very physically through dance, clapping, singing, and humming. Focusing on the rhythm of music can improve a child’s general physical coordination and practicing a musical instrument can improve more specific coordination and dexterity.

Harmony: Another component of music is harmony and here the benefits of studying music are both literal and metaphorical. The study of harmony develops the ability to hear and discriminate among various tones and intervals and can lead to an appreciation of a wider range of musical styles. Metaphorically the study of harmony can be used as a means of teaching the benefit of harmony in general in how we relate to others. Such virtues as sharing and cooperation can be introduced through the musical element of harmony.

“Music is the language of the spirit. It opens the secret of life bringing peace, abolishing strife.” Kahlil Gibran

Melody: Built on the foundations of rhythm and harmony is the element of melody. Again, the benefits of study here are both literal and metaphorical. Since music has long been used as an aid to memory and a means of improving memory, the study of melody can be beneficial. The study of increasingly complex melodies can lead to an improvement of memory for more complex ideas as well. Metaphorically, the study of melody introduces the idea of individuality. Like musical pieces, everyone has their own individual melody which develops over time.

“Music is the universal language of mankind.” Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

A consideration of the basic elements of music can illustrate several important benefits of studying music. Studying specific genres can yield other benefits. Jazz is important to the study and ability of improvisation. The blues illustrates emotional expression. Classical music reveals organization and precision as well as timeless beauty. At the same time, music also shows the universal nature of such values as every genre contains these elements as well as the basics of rhythm, harmony, and melody. The rewards of studying and enjoying music extend far beyond the simple act of listening and playing. As important as these are, the applied benefits are also well worth examining.

I recommend:

Listening to a wide variety of music in a wide variety of genres.

I recommend reading:

Phil Goulding *Classical Music: The 50 Greatest Composers and Their 1,000 Greatest Works*

Daniel Levitin, *This is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession*

John Szwed *Jazz 101: A Complete Guide to Learning and Loving Jazz*

The Importance of Philosophy



For most people, philosophy is an unfamiliar subject, to begin with, so to argue that it is useful in everyday life might seem like a difficult proposition. Yet, with the growth of applied philosophy and the practice of philosophical counseling, philosophy has taken on a new sense of importance. In truth, philosophy has always been important. As Epicurus pointed out “Vain is the word of a philosopher which does not heal any suffering. For just as there is no profit in medicine if it does not expel the diseases of the body, so there is no profit in philosophy either if it does not expel the suffering of the mind.”

Therapy for the Sane: Lou Marinoff has called the practice of philosophy “therapy for the sane.” This is a good description of the recent philosophical counseling

movement but as the Epicurus quote illustrates philosophers have always been concerned with improving life and relieving suffering. It is only recent movements such as analytic philosophy which have moved away from this tradition. Philosophy invites us to reflect on how we can lead a happy and meaningful life. It also provides an opportunity to address life's ultimate questions involving suffering and death and in the best sense of the word is, indeed therapy understood as care of the soul.

The Power of Ideas: Philosophy is really about the study of ideas and their power in our lives. Alfred Adler once said, "A person's behavior springs from his ideas." So, the study of ideas is important not only to understand the actions of others but ourselves. Our life is ultimately guided by many ideas such as truth, beauty, justice, meaning, and the good to name just a few. A systematic study of these can lead to a greater understanding of some of the most important aspects of our life.

Meaning: The question of meaning is one of the most important aspects of anyone's life and the psychiatrist Viktor Frankl recognized that a large part of psychological suffering results from the failure to find meaning. His approach to therapy called Logotherapy is premised on the idea that finding meaning is an important key to mental health. Philosophy provides a method for examining our lives and the attempt to find meaning.

The study of philosophy is often seen as an abstract exercise with very little relevance to everyday life and the problems real people encounter. But, the best philosophy provides just the kinds of insights one needs to address

life's ultimate questions and help find meaning and purpose in life. Furthermore, we are influenced every day by a world of ideas. Understanding them and their effect on us is a worthy and important pursuit.

I recommend reading:

William Irvine *The Stoic Challenge: A Philosopher's Guide to Becoming Tougher, Calmer, and More Resilient*

Lou Marinoff *Plato, Not Prozac! Applying Philosophy to Everyday Problems*

Alain de Botton *The Consolations of Philosophy*

The Importance of Physics



The scientist J.B.S. Haldane once said, “My own suspicion is that the Universe is not only queerer than we suppose but queerer than we *can* suppose.” This is the daunting prospect facing anyone who tries to understand how the world works and where everything came from. But, this is precisely what physics attempts to do and with the advances made in relativity and quantum mechanics, we have made progress.

Yes, there are still unanswered questions but as strange as the implications of relativity and quantum mechanics are their accuracy so far tells us that they are good explanations as far as they go. But, the question remains. If the universe is “queerer than we can suppose,” is there any point or benefit in studying the science that studies the universe? Let’s look at some possible benefits.

Appearance/Reality: An important distinction made by early philosophers and scientists still holds and is a useful one to remember in everyday life. There is a difference between appearance and reality. In other words, things are not always what they seem. Physical objects appear to be solid yet we know the reality is that they are composed of very tiny particles which themselves are in constant motion and which consist of largely empty space. Many of our common-sense intuitions about how the world works are based on appearances and are wrong. We would do well to remember that to truly understand anything it is important to look below the surface to the reality underneath.

“The best that most of us can hope to achieve in physics is simply to misunderstand at a deeper level.” Wolfgang Pauli

Wonder: The practical benefit of our everyday perspective allows us to get on with the business of living without having to deal with the realities that physics describes. As Richard Dawkins points out, we have evolved to live in a middle world between the immensely large objects in the universe such as galaxies, and the vanishingly small objects in the world such as electrons and quarks. Our minds are not innately tuned to observe these levels or to comprehend them without great effort. But, as a result of being evolved to live in this middle world, we can lose some of the sense of wonder that comes from a study of the large and the small. Physics helps us regain this important feeling of wonder.

“If you are not completely confused by quantum mechanics, you do not understand it.” John Wheeler

Connections: Physics also shows that everything is ultimately connected in many surprising ways. If you contemplate how the universe of the large looks from the perspective of galaxies and groups of galaxies you quickly see that there is no way to distinguish individual people here on earth. Likewise, if you contemplate the universe of the small from the perspective of an electron or a quark you also recognize that there is no way to distinguish individuals. This shift in perspective from the every day to the physics-based perspective reveals a world more connected than we usually consider. Appreciating that is an important insight and one that has many uses in everyday life.

“The most incomprehensible thing about the world is that it is comprehensible.” Albert Einstein

Of course, there are also many very tangibly practical benefits to studying physics in a world based on the flow of digital information and technology. None of this would be possible without the advances made in physics. While we may not contemplate the queerness of the universe on a daily basis, we do live with the results of our knowledge of this queer universe. The power of these results will continue to grow over the next few decades and an understanding of the forces behind these advances in technology will be invaluable.

I recommend reading:

Roger Jones *Physics For The Rest of Us: Ten Basic Ideas of Twentieth-Century Physics That Everyone Should Know...*

*and How They Have Shaped Our Culture and
Consciousness*

Brian Greene *The Elegant Universe: Superstrings, Hidden
Dimensions, and the Quest for the Ultimate Theory*

Richard Feynman *Six Easy Pieces: Essentials of Physics
Explained by Its Most Brilliant Teacher*

The Importance of Politics



At any given time in history, it is relatively easy to find politicians who have fallen out of favor with the people they are charged with representing or leading. In the United States, congressional disapproval seems higher than ever. Many people instinctively distrust politicians and many otherwise well-qualified people are put off pursuing public service entirely once they observe what those who seek elected office must endure to win an election. Given all of this can there be any good benefits to the study of politics? Since the essence of politics is the act of coming together in civil society to solve the problems in that society it seems that there are certainly practical benefits to the study of this much-maligned subject.

Cooperation: An important element of politics is the act of cooperation. This can be difficult at times when the parties involved disagree on fundamental issues of principle. But, some things cannot be accomplished alone and we must

work together to get them done. How this cooperation gets organized is a central focus of politics.

Compromise: What makes politics so frustrating is the need for compromise. But, when people differ on basic principles and ideals, getting things done requires compromise. Rather than look at this necessity as a flaw of politics we should look at it as an indication of our liberty. Compromise is rarely needed in societies ruled by dictators since they can demand conformity and impose their will without consulting others. The moment we bring other people into the process we introduce the need to compromise. This is an indispensable feature of a free society.

Problem-Solving: Of course, the goal of coming together to cooperate and compromise is to solve problems. As a method of problem-solving, politics seems impractical and inefficient. But, again we must remember that with liberty comes the ability to disagree and this means that we cannot use the power of politics to impose our will on others. As the Framers of our government in the United States recognized, our government is ultimately based on the consent of the governed. The solutions we arrive at for our problems are also ultimately based on this same consent.

A truly informed electorate is necessary to make our political system work at its best and this includes a working knowledge of the system we have. The direct benefits of this come from being better-informed voters. But, as with the other subjects we have examined there are also indirect benefits to the study of politics. Our national politics is just a macrocosm of our daily lives where the same need to

cooperate, compromise, and solve problems exists. Recognizing this will benefit both realms of life and give us a greater appreciation for the importance of politics.

“People often say, with pride, ‘I’m not interested in politics.’ They might as well say, ‘I’m not interested in my standard of living, my health, my job, my rights, my freedoms, my future, or any future.’ ... If we mean to keep any control over our world and lives, we must be interested in politics.”

Martha Gellhorn

I recommend reading:

The Federalist Papers

Jonathan Haidt *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*

Howard Fineman *The Thirteen American Arguments: Enduring Debates That Define and Inspire Our Country*

The Important of Psychology



With the growth of the self-help movement has come a growing interest in and knowledge of psychology. Given this, it would seem obvious that there are benefits to the study of psychology. But, let's look beyond the obvious benefits to see if other aspects of psychology can give us useful insights.

Self-Help: The ability to work through one's own emotional difficulties is a useful benefit to the study of psychology. The insights available from the study of psychology are particularly useful in sorting through the various approaches to find one that is most compatible with each individual's needs.

Self-Knowledge: With the rise of self-help has also come the potential to increase one's self-knowledge. Indeed, a good knowledge of the self is critical to the successful use of most self-help techniques. Psychology encourages the

kind of reflection that one needs to gain a better sense of self.

Reason and Feeling: An important benefit to the story of psychology is the recognition of the distinction between reason and feeling in thinking. While the two function together, there is an important difference in their role in thinking. How they are understood separately and how they work together are both often misunderstood and the study of psychology helps to clarify these questions.

Metaphysics: At the root of every approach in psychology is a set of presumptions about how the mind works and how it is related to the brain. Too often this important aspect of the subject is ignored and consequently many people misunderstand the role of the brain in our thinking. While psychology has advanced well beyond the insights of the 17th-century philosopher Rene Descartes, many people still have a Cartesian dualist view of the mind and the brain. But, there is much that we now know about this subject that is both interesting and useful.

At its most fundamental psychology is the study of the mind and how it works. Given the central importance of thinking and information processing in our world today the benefits of studying psychology are numerous. Given that much of what we think about how we think is wrong, the study of psychology is also necessary to correct some of these mistaken intuitions. It is perhaps these less obvious benefits that are the most valuable insights we can gain from the study of psychology.

In the past few years, there have been numerous books published in the realm of popular psychology. Many of these have focused on happiness addressing what it is and how to achieve it. There have also been books published on creativity, regret, mindfulness, joy, and love. Clearly, there is an interest in these psychological concepts and many insights to be gained from learning about them.

I recommend reading:

Tasha Eurich *Insight: The Surprising Truth About How Others See Us, How We See Ourselves, and Why the Answers Matter More Than We Think*

Lauren Slater *Opening Skinner's Box: Great Psychological Experiments of the Twentieth Century*

Jonathan Haidt *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*

The Importance of Religion



More people profess a given religion than there are people who actively practice that religion and it also seems to be the case that there are fewer people who have a working knowledge of religion (both their own and others) than there are people who actively practice a religion. Some studies show that the less religious a person is the more knowledgeable they are about religion in general. But, for those who practice a religion are there any benefits to the study of their own religion? Are there any good reasons to study other religions at all? Let's examine these questions.

Tolerance: Many people believe without question that their religion is the correct one and all others are mistaken in important ways. If nothing else the study of religion can

foster tolerance towards other beliefs and the people who profess them. In a world with more and more religions being formed all the time, this is an important benefit to religious and non-religious people.

Moderation: As Charles Kimball pointed out in his book titled *When Religion Becomes Evil*, problems occur when religious believers take their views as the only right ones and become more extreme in their practice of religion. But, the study of religion can lead to more moderation in the practice of religion and as a result, it becomes less likely that dangerous consequences arise from the practice of religion.

Secularism: While this point is controversial, ultimately the benefit of studying religion as an academic subject is to foster more, not less, secularism. Indeed, studies show that the more people know about religion (their own and others) the less likely they are to actively practice any religion. In other words, the more likely they are to be agnostic or atheist.

Unlike the other subjects examined in this series, the argument I am making here is that the study of the subject leads to less active application of the subject and this is a benefit. But, this is also what makes many people reluctant to take on a serious study of religion. They intuitively recognize that once they learn about other religions and the details of their own, their beliefs will seem less plausible and they may end up giving them up entirely.

But, is this such a bad thing? Certainly one can hold fast to a sense of spirituality without holding onto certain beliefs

about how the world works that are largely outdated and incorrect. Certainly, one can find meaning and purpose in life and live according to a set of ethical principles without appealing to a set of metaphysical presumptions that are largely at odds with what we know about how the world works.

As Carl Sagan pointed out: “In some respects, science has far surpassed religion in delivering awe. How is it that hardly any major religion has looked at science and concluded, ‘This is better than we thought! The Universe is much bigger than our prophets said, grander, more subtle, more elegant. God must be even greater than we dreamed!’? Instead, they say, ‘No, no, no! My god is a little god, and I want him to stay that way.’ A religion, old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the Universe as revealed by modern science might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths.”

I recommend reading:

Stephen Prothero *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – And Doesn't*

Bernhard Anderson *Understanding the Old Testament*

Frank Mead *Handbook of Denominations in the United States*