A recent post on the New York Times website by Stanley Fish, a noted literary theorist and a former Dean, claimed that the value of research in the humanities, at least, could not be justified in any way other than for itself. A new interpretation of Milton (to paraphrase Fish) will not save your soul – or the state’s budget. It won’t stop people from behaving unethically. And the main reason for studying Milton is certainly not that it will get you a great job.

All these arguments, Fish complains, are either grievously reductionist or extravagantly ambitious. Reading great books does not, on its own, make you a great person: if it did, then a Faculty of Arts would, by definition, be full of virtuous people. So, “[t]o the question “of what use are the humanities?”, argues Fish, “the only honest answer is none whatsoever…The humanities are their own good”.

There is a kernel of truth in Fish’s claim. It lies in his appeal to the inherent value of studying great works of literature or philosophy. This is surely one of the most powerful reasons why we value a liberal arts education; but he moves too quickly from what he rightly condemns as the belief that the humanities can save us, to the claim that they serve no purpose other than to provide pleasure to those who practice the disciplines.

First of all, one can think that the humanities and social sciences serve a vital purpose without thinking there is any single standard or ideal to which they must appeal. On their own our disciplines can’t resolve the biggest problems our societies face, but they can help us ask better questions. They can provide the conceptual, contextual and philosophical tools required to challenge conventional thinking, as well as the space and time in which to think more broadly and deeply about issues that might otherwise
be glossed over. There is no major challenge today – be it global poverty, climate change, AIDS, or economic reform – that doesn’t require the tools and insights honed in our disciplines. There is no such thing as a purely technical solution to climate change or global poverty, for example. We will need all the help science can provide, but equally, there are fundamental questions of ethics, moral psychology, history, culture and social and legal institution-building that need to be tackled as well. The greatest gains in knowledge over the next decades of the 21st century will come from collaboration between the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences, not their segregation.

Of course, whether a discipline helps us address global poverty or climate change is not the only justification for its value, or even the main one. Basic research in the humanities and social sciences must be allowed to go wherever the questions lead, however unfashionable and however (seemingly) abstract. Relevance is often a critical tonic, but it can be fleeting as well. We need to take the long-term view and be prepared to challenge conventional thinking, including what we assume to be relevant or irrelevant.

At the heart of a liberal arts education lies the question of what it means to live a truly human life. And Plato’s Republic offers one powerful vision of that quest and how you might begin to answer it. This might seem odd, given how many readers associate his vision in that book with the unworldly heights of philosopher kings and the ideal “forms” sitting above everyday appearances. But in fact, Plato offers us a picture of human beings who, although in a sense硬化了 to pursue the good, are often defeated by it. Socrates says at one point that we are “perplexed” by the good and can’t acquire stable beliefs about it like we can about other things. And yet we can’t help but try to grasp it. We seek meaning and understanding of our world, but that doesn’t require absolute transcendence of it.

The mission of a liberal arts faculty is to provide its students, as well as the broader public, with an opportunity to pursue fundamental questions about who we are, how we live and what matters. For our students, it means equipping them with the skills and intellectual tools to lead meaningful and productive lives, to cultivate a form of intellectual autonomy. And it is our job to offer to the wider community – here in Australia and beyond – a breadth and depth of ideas and arguments often missing in the froth and spin of everyday debate.

We often speak about the desirable “attributes” of a graduate of the University of Sydney. These are important criteria that help structure our units of study and the way we assess our students. But I believe the most important attribute a student graduating from our Faculty should possess (among the many we list) is a form of intellectual autonomy. First, a student should possess the tools to think critically. This includes the ability to analyse and evaluate arguments, to take initiative, to recognise and define problems, to search for and use relevant data, to ask pertinent (and pointed!) questions and to make carefully reasoned judgments. Second, our students should be able to recognise the ethical demands and challenges they will inevitably face in life, and they should be able to reason carefully and clearly about them with others. Some moral questions can be intractable, to be sure, but there are better and worse ways of tackling them. Third, someone with intellectual autonomy should also be able to communicate and collaborate effectively with others. This means being able to write a decent sentence and explain yourself succinctly and clearly to others. Finally, to have intellectual autonomy is to be open to the world beyond familiar boundaries. Our student body needs to be diverse and accessible to of ability and potential whatever their social, cultural or economic background.

One of the original ideas underlying the emergence of a humanist education in early modern Europe (but not limited to Europe, of course) is that of a community of scholars – made up of students and teachers – that transcends national, ethnic, cultural and disciplinary boundaries, bound together by a common and equal citizenship in the “Republic of Letters”. Our challenge is to make sense of what a Republic of Letters means in the early decades of the 21st century.

“All the property of friends is held in common”, goes one famous humanist maxim, and this well describes the nature of the scholarship and teaching in the Faculty of Arts. Our work is owned, ultimately, by the public and is intended to benefit all. Economists refer to the “tragedy of the commons” to explain what happens when a limited shared resource is ruined through the seemingly rational actions of a multitude of individuals acting independently of each other. Our Faculty has a fundamental duty to help sustain and protect what we might call the “cultural commons” – that common store of ideas, concepts, visions and practices that human beings have been deliberating about over thousands of years and which we need in order to lead decent and meaningful lives. 

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Visit our website www.sanctasophi-college.edu.au/alumnae/ or contact the College on 9577 2100 to update your details and make sure you are included in special events throughout 2010.