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## Critical Idealism's Defense of Investment in the Liberal Arts: Précis

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A Critical Idealist begins by asking what are the (usually, unquestioned) presuppositions of the issue at hand. Appropriately, in my humble opinion, the usual defense of the Liberal Arts builds on issues of change, skills, knowledge, and creativity. However, these terms are employed as if they are self-evident. Maybe they're not self-evident!

### Introduction

Succinctly, rather than acquiring skills in order to create, we are a creating species that must acquire skills – our instincts are so lousy. The symbolic (figurative language) and responsibility (morality) are not after-thoughts or “frosting-on-the-cake” but at the very core of what it means to be and become human. Creativity, the symbolic, and morality all require education because they are not “natural.”

### General Observations:

1. Humanity is the animal that can intentionally change nature. We don't act merely by instinct but intentionally. Every member of our species does this. Perhaps we can even call it the species marker.
2. We share with other sentient species a stimulus/response system, but we do something to a degree that no other species we've encountered does: We insert symbols in between stimulus and response.
3. Symbol systems are figurative systems that “see” things “as if” because they allow us to see “identity” in the midst of “difference” (i.e., to see the concealed possibilities that “aren't there” in the phenomena directly). All language arose out of the figurative power of consciousness (Jean Paul: the dictionaries are full of dead metaphors). It is an illusion to say that the “literal” is the foundation of language.
4. These symbols systems are not given “by nature.” They must be acquired by learning. Hence, education is absolutely basic to every human being. We can call it a “universal right.”
5. Everyone learns symbol systems so that the mere acquisition of a symbol system to conduct one's life is required for everyone, and every symbol system has value (positive or negative depending upon what the individual does with it). No symbol system, then, is in itself “better” than another.
6. A “Liberal Arts”/“Humanities” education intentionally seeks the acquisition of symbol system on a spectrum of their “universality” (e.g., mathematics, languages of cultural range [including the “language” of computers], professional/discipline-based symbol systems, etc.). The goal of a Liberal Arts/Humanities education is not primarily acquisition of a professional symbol system, but the understanding of the absolute centrality of symbol systems and the gaining of familiarity with how one acquires “new” symbols system, generally, and followed by strategies of ever greater

specificity depending upon the specific symbol system in question. In short, there are different strategies for different symbol systems.

6. It is not simply that we must learn skills and acquire knowledge that are ever changing, but we each of us must cultivate her/his creative potential by the acquisition of symbol systems, and a Liberal Arts/Humanities education sets out **consciously** to do that.

Quintessential Claim of these Reflections:  
Autonomous Freedom (not mere choices) and Morality

There is something crucial that is missing in the statement that, in my humble opinion is as central to education as our autonomous, creative freedom “above” but experienced as never separate from nature to do things that nature on its own can’t do: Autonomous, creative freedom is the condition that makes it possible for us to be moral agents in the world. We can but because we’re free we don’t have to take responsibility for our creative agency. As a consequence, a Humanity’s education places this moral capacity right at the core of education, not as frosting on the cake that one thinks about later. We are not just a species that **can** do things that nature on its own can’t, but we are a species that is capable of asking **what ought to be – both “can” and “ought” are possessed by humanity to a degree not found elsewhere in other species that makes them a species marker.**

However, a humanity’s education is not the “moral formation” of purported “religious” instruction. Morality is especially not two things: 1) Moral maxims are not relative to cultures. Relative to cultures are the “civic law” and the ethical systems of social institutions. Moral maxims are what are necessary for the civic law and ethical systems to “do the right thing regardless of one’s or the group’s self-interest,” that is, to be “just.” They are universal principles, “above” the (civic) law. 2) Moral maxims are not lists that one can use to wag in the faces of others. For example, there are two sets (!) of Ten Commandments in Exodus (Exodus 20 and 34). They are **NOT, absolute**, moral maxims but, rather, **relative, “civic laws”** for two very different kinds of communities: nomadic and sedimentary. Moral maxims are “above” civic laws, and the Ten Commandments (or whatever civic law to which the community is committed) requires that its “citizens” be “moral” in the first place. As examples of moral maxims, Kant spoke in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* of four duties that are owed to others and to oneself: 1) don’t lie; 2) don’t commit suicide out of social disgrace; 3) develop one’s talents; and 4) respond to the suffering of others. These maxims could easily be placed on the banner of every Liberal Arts institution.

Civic laws and institutional norms are “**hypothetical**” imperatives: “If” (!) I want to perform according to the norms of my society or institutions, “then” I must conform to these rules.

Moral maxims are “**categorical**” imperatives: They arise and can be applied only by the individual **because the individual can do things that nature/social context on its own can’t do.** Whenever we act, we implicitly or explicitly “give ourselves permission.” No one else can understand our actions for us, and no one else can know what the maxim was (or was not) applied to guide our actions. All this that is exclusive to the individual is categorical, not hypothetical.

We can develop criteria for assessing moral maxims. They are also usually applied implicitly but can be applied explicitly and immediately. They were summarized by Immanuel Kant as the “three forms” of the Categorical Imperative and the “three maxims” of the understanding.

**NOTE:** I spare you a summary here of the three forms of the categorical imperative and three maxims of the understanding. However, they require a summary because they are categorical and not hypothetical (i.e., each person for her-/himself must understand them for her-/himself and to act on them for her-/himself). One can be aided by someone else when it comes to understanding them, but each individual must learn them for her-/himself. (BTW: They are perhaps frequently misunderstood ...!!)

**IN SHORT:** A Liberal Arts/Humanities education is concerned with encouraging the individual to cultivate her/his autonomous, creative freedom (acquire figurative language) on the basis of self-understand and self-applied moral maxims.

We “educators” can’t learn or act for our students, but we can help them grasp the conditions of their lives (both material and spiritual – physical and understanding) and how those conditions make it possible for us to be moral agents of our autonomous, creative freedom. We can help them come to terms with their being “more” than mere animals. We can help them be and become human.

**CONTRIBUTION TO THE BIRTHING AND THRIVING OF HUMAN BEINGS, THE “LIBERAL ARTS”/“HUMANITIES” ARE SOMETHING VERY WORTH ONE’S INVESTMENT – HOWEVER ONE DEFINES INVESTMENT!**