

What a Hollywood comedy can teach us about
the emptiness of mere social utility

Why Intellectual Work Matters

Zena Hitz

In 2001 I was a graduate student in philosophy, writing a dissertation on ancient views of self-knowledge, luxuriating in the physical and intellectual riches of Princeton University. One morning in September, as I walked as usual onto campus on a tree-lined path, one of the department staff called out something to me about a dramatic news story, and I stopped into the student center to look at a television. You know what I saw: two buildings on fire. After some minutes, one building collapsed into ash and the news announcers lost their words. At the time, my brother lived in New York City and I was sure he was dead—it took some hours to determine that he wasn't. The fear washed over and receded, but a second reaction went deep like an arrow and stuck. Like the speechless news reporters, I lost confidence in who I was.

After that I was no longer satisfied with academic work. A curtain had been lifted at the boundaries of my life, and I understood that my green pastures were surrounded by

smoking wasteland. I felt moved to *do something*, to respond to the suffering that soaks the whole world like air or water. It took months to regain a functional equilibrium as

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a graduate student, and years before I understood what it really meant to *do something*.

Since then I have often seen my fellow academics (and many others) unsettled by the magnitude of human suffering and haunted by the same specter of uselessness. Some leave the profession for more practical tasks; some change their academic work to be more relevant to contemporary concerns. I call this practical, results-driven movement “activism.” It includes activism’s traditional forms of advocacy and protest; but far more than that, it is any concern that holds political or social results as the central goal.

Activism in this broad sense rules the day in contemporary higher education. The core purpose of the University of Texas, according to its mission statement, is “to transform lives for the benefit of society.” Education is for the sake of “social transformation,” says Harvard College—or “the improvement of the world today,” according to Yale University. Activism reaches far beyond progressivism. Conservatives, too, use academic institutions to wield social and political influence, and activism is often nonpartisan. Partisan politics on campus generates strong emotions, but no one is outraged by the assumption that political and social goods are paramount.

The agriculture school at a land-grant university is founded exclusively for economic and social goals, and this is surely appropriate. But the world is improved by many types of enterprise not learned at a university, and there is much taught at a university that is not socially transformative. What would the life-saving, society-transforming product be in history, philosophy, or English? For evolutionary biology, astrophysics, or mathematics? Many academic subjects are in a natural dialogue with social and political issues, but if they are bent toward social and political goals, they are used in a way that neither suits the disciplines nor serves the goals.

Activism is crucial for social and political functioning, and some professional training

is sometimes necessary for some forms of it. As such it has some place at institutions that provide training in the professions. But its conquest of the whole of intellectual life—and thus the whole enterprise of higher education—must be resisted.

And yet the vision of the suffering world is revelatory: it uncovers all sorts of comfortable falsehoods and pointless tasks. It turns books to straw and draws soul-crushing ennui from lucrative and prestigious positions. So it should. Our work ought to serve real human needs. But there is a difference between service and corrosive forms of activism, however difficult to articulate and to find in practice. Seeing how the urge to make a difference goes out of order might be a good place to start.

Laughter and other little human things

Preston Sturges’s 1941 film *Sullivan’s Travels* hides in its screwball comedy a profound meditation on the ways an earnest desire to do good can go wrong. John L. Sullivan, the filmmaker protagonist, has made his fortune writing popular comedies. Nonetheless, in an era of depression and war, he is haunted by the failure of his work to address the suffering of the poor and marginalized. He aspires to imitate a weighty film allegorizing the struggle between labor and capital. Mocked for his new seriousness and his privileged background by his circle of advisors, he decides he must experience real poverty for himself. He plans to ride the freights and commune with the impoverished common man for a time, to see for himself firsthand what poverty is really like.

Sullivan’s attempts to experience poverty are a colossal failure. His handlers insist on following him in a huge vehicle fully stocked with a kitchen, chef, doctor, and press team. He gets rid of them and hitches a long ride on a truck. He emerges to find himself back in Hollywood and is joined there by a love



The comedy Sullivan's Travels has much to say about doing "good" poorly

interest played by Veronica Lake. The would-be hobos hop a freight that brings them, hungry and out of cash, to the Las Vegas diner where his handlers happen to be waiting for him. After a brief, final pampering, he and Lake are able to shake their support staff (apart from a discreet cameraman) and launch out on their enterprise in earnest. The narrative gives way to a montage of their experiences of jungle camps, shelters infested with pests, inedible meals at soup kitchens, and demeaning pickup work. The images are poignant thanks to the surroundings but indicate quite an enjoyable adventure. Sullivan's social concern culminates in the picturesque. When the pair are reduced to eating out of a genuine trash can, they give up and head back to normal life.

By calling attention to Sullivan's voyeuristic perspective, the film's images of the poor and the desperate reach out to the viewer with greater effect. Sullivan himself is haunted by the failure of his efforts to become poor. After the second "rescue" by his handlers, he complains, "It's funny the way everything keeps shoving me back to Hollywood... as if

some force were saying, 'Get back where you belong... You don't belong to real life, you phony you.'"

Sturges thus honors the movement of the heart toward the poor and the marginalized. Yet he diagnoses its inefficacy with brutal comic accuracy. An impassible gulf lies between the poor and the socially concerned middle and upper classes. Concern without knowledge or experience reeks of self-serving condescension. But to experience poverty as one among many possible learning experiences is not to experience poverty at all. In the face of the gulf, concern for the poor quickly collapses under the narcissism of the narrative, and self-regard wins an easy victory over self-sacrifice. Sullivan's press team is on hand to translate his experiences into attractive, arresting catchphrases. The desire to make a difference turns out to be a desire to make a splash.

Sullivan says farewell to his adventure with the poor by handing out cash in a final media event. Here the tone of the film shifts dramatically from light to dark, as he meets real poverty for the first time. He is knocked

out cold, robbed of his cash and his boots, and thrown into a freight car. The perpetrator is hit by a train and the boots indicate to the police that it is Sullivan who was killed. Sullivan himself emerges from his freight car and gets into a fight with a railroad security guard while still disoriented. His protestations of his true identity are ignored as ravings, and he is sentenced to six years hard labor.

In the fearsome and cruel prison into which he is sentenced, Sullivan finds out what it means to be poor, helpless, and subject to the arbitrary whims of coercive authority. While his upper-class background made him ludicrous in earlier ventures into poverty, here it manifests as a failure to know his place and provokes brutal rebukes and reprisals from the warden. A local church invites the prisoners to a viewing of slapstick cartoons. Amid the roars of laughter of his fellow inmates, Sullivan comes to understand the value of his previous work. Once a final plot twist returns him to his former state of comfort and affluence, he renounces his attempts at more serious filmmaking. He concludes, "There's a lot to be said for making people laugh. Don't you know that's all some people have? It's not much, but it's better than nothing in this cockeyed caravan."

It is natural to be repulsed by the resolution of the film. Sullivan uses his social status to pry himself from prison and returns to Hollywood luxury, supporting his swimming pool lifestyle by providing sources of laughter to the desperate and impoverished. All the same, Sullivan's final insight is real. He understands that his ordinary work all on its own meets a crucial human need.

Comedy is one of the little human things, totally useless and yet completely essential for anything we would recognize as human flourishing. A little splinter of the human good, as Sullivan sees, can find its way even into the darkest places, places where the little human things may be the only human things at all.

I don't have a theory of little human things, but I know them when I see them: walks in the snowy woods, tuneless singing in the car, fishing for little perch that are just thrown back into the water, Christmas decorations, models of the *Lusitania* made out of toothpicks. Some emerge spontaneously, given a bit of leisure and space; others, like comedies, require cultivation and work. Cracking a joke is simple; performing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is not. Contemplating the meaning of life over a few beers at the lake happens without trying; getting to the bottom of Plato's dialogues does not.

Between a casual joke at the bar and the Folger's *Dream* lies a vast landscape of laughter: charades, funny stories, dumb TV shows, fake mustaches, elaborate practical jokes, skits for the office holiday party, community theatre. The realm of the intellect may be wider: the child collecting bugs, reading worn paperbacks at the beach house, spirited arguments over the meanings of words, poking through the Galilee dirt for artifacts, Albert Einstein looking at the clock tower.

The difference between the little human things and their cultivated counterparts should not be exaggerated. There are ten million reasons for pursuing comedy, art, music, and intellectual life to the highest available level of excellence. But high achievement doesn't justify the practice: the human need does. Music is pointless in a world where no one recognizes the value of ordinary piano lessons or singing in harmony, even if a class of highly trained musicians continues to perform the finest classical compositions. Likewise, there's no point in getting to the bottom of Plato's dialogues if human beings don't chew the fat at the lake or mull the justice of things while washing windows. The little human things make the human needs manifest; without those needs in mind, the grander endeavors lose their way.

Work—real work, work that matters—serves others by providing for a human need, some piece of the human good. For most of us, including the poor, serving others through work is the most obvious way we “transform lives for the benefit of society.” A garbage collector doesn’t “make a difference” in the sense today’s young people are constantly encouraged to do. He or she will never be featured on a major media platform for his innovative contribution to society. But most of us are far removed from what it means to live in a filthy street or can imagine what it would mean to rely on individual initiative to remove household waste. Collecting garbage is a form of service, just as producing comedy is. That should begin to suggest to us just how superficial and how hostile to the interests of humanity our notion of “making a difference” really is.

Academics haunted by social concerns—and I am one—are Sullivans, by and large. Genuinely moved by real human suffering, we find ourselves caught up in absurd media stunts and self-regarding echo chambers. Our attempts to leave the ivory tower land us in an inner Hollywood. Instead of meeting the real human need that academic study and intellectual life are meant to provide for, we overweigh our vocation with activist concerns. Once our confidence in our core mission is undermined by this or that social urgency, we promote correct opinions and political outcomes over the sustained and serious pursuit of fundamental questions. Like Sullivan, we academics must drive out the ghosts of “uselessness” and “irrelevance” and return to our role as stewards of a certain crucial piece of human flourishing.

An escape from “small utilities”

Disaffected and insecure academics ought to return for refreshment to Jonathan Rose’s 2001 work, *The Intellectual Life of the Brit-*

ish Working Classes. Rose chronicled the grassroots intellectual movements that began in Britain in the late eighteenth century and continued on into the Great Books movement in the United States in the early twentieth, from the perspective of the working-class participants and organizers. The result is a testimony—unrivaled, to my knowledge—of the value of intellectual life for its own sake. Consider the testimony of Richard Hillyer (b. 1900), a cowman’s son, on reading Tennyson:

The coloured words flashed out and entranced my fancy. They drew pictures in the mind. Words became magical, incantations, abracadabra which called up spirits. My dormant imagination opened like a flower in the sun. Life at home was drab, and colourless, with nothing to light up the monotony of the unchanging days. Here in books was a limitless world that I could have for my own. It was like coming up from the ocean and seeing the universe for the first time.

Hillyer describes the way that books and learning provide escape from ordinary monotony—what he calls elsewhere “the small utilities of life.” Such an escape is not a distraction but a discovery of a broader realm of reality.

The drabness and colorlessness that Hillyer describes is surely not only a matter of his daily sensory experience. Grim surroundings diminish us and our sense of worth, just as glossy grandeur inflates it. Hillyer has discovered a source of dignity as much as he has discovered an escape. How our dignity could be unlocked by a few words on a page is a magic trick that seems beyond the human capacity to explain.

The cultivation of an inner world that is at the same time a source of insight and understanding is similar to the account of learning

given by cotton spinner Charles Campbell (b. 1793):

The lover of learning, however straitened his circumstances, or rugged his condition, has yet a source of enjoyment within himself that the world never dreams of. . . . Perhaps he is solving a problem of Euclid, or soaring with Newton amidst the planetary world, and endeavoring to discover the nature and properties of that invisible attraction by which the Almighty mind has subjected inanimate matter to laws that resemble the operations of intelligence; or descending from the harmony of the spheres, he contemplates the principle of animal life, and explores the intricate labyrinths of physiological phenomena. . . . Pursuing the footsteps of Locke and Reid, he traces the origins of his own ideas, feeling, and passions: or . . . he unbends the wing of his imagination, and solaces his weary mind in the delightful gardens of the classic muse of poetry and music.

Intellectual life provides an escape in that it is beyond “straitened circumstances,” but the escape is again a flight into realities beyond oneself: animal behavior, astronomy, and the mechanics of the inner life. The intellect has no limit to its subject matter: it reaches greedily for the whole of everything. It was the prospect of somehow holding the whole world within oneself that led Plato and Aristotle to think of the intellect as something divine, as holding out the furthest heights to which a human being could reach.

There is an irony in using Rose’s book in an argument against activist approaches to intellectual life. Rose intends to show the social utility of intellectual life: the grassroots intellectual movements he chronicles were also movements of political liberation. The striving for intellectual development for working people was part and parcel of the Labour

movement in Britain and similar movements in the U.S. And yet it is impossible to read the testimonies themselves without seeing that intellectual life mattered to these people regardless of its political efficacy. Take Alice Foley, a socialist cotton-mill worker (b. 1891), writing of how her new intellectual life radicalized her:

[A former croft worker] hated the industrial system and had found liberation by operating a market-garden on the edge of the moors where he had the use of a powerful telescope erected on his land. Indoors he gave magic-lantern shows of the heavens and their constellations, and on clear evenings at the dark of the year we were invited to view the rings around Saturn, the beauty of the Milky Way or the craters and valleys of the Moon. After carefully sighting the objects he turned to us solemnly, “Sithee, lasses, isn’t that a marvellous seet; a stupendous universe, yet we fritter our lives away i’ wars and petty spites!” As youngsters we gazed, inclined to giggle; then came a moment of silent awe as the awareness of “night clad in the beauty of a thousand inauspicious stars—the vast of night and its void”—seeped into consciousness.

Perhaps Foley’s radicalization included acquiring new beliefs about desirable political and social outcomes. But it began in the contemplation of things that had nothing to do with politics, things in themselves utterly useless, and yet within which it was possible to find a fuller sort of humanity than ordinary life offered. And yet surely gazing at the heavens did not determine Foley’s destiny as a socialist. The freedom from small utilities and large ones, from colorless surroundings, from the human diminishment offered in given social roles—this freedom grounds a vast variety of human possibilities.

The emptiness of mere social utility

Intellectual life properly understood cultivates a space of retreat within a human being, a place where real reflection takes place. We step back from concerns of practical benefit, personal or public. We withdraw into small rooms, literal or internal. In the space of retreat we consider fundamental questions: what human happiness consists in, the origins and nature of the universe, whether human beings are part of nature, and whether and how a truly just community is possible. From the space of retreat emerges poetry, mathematics, and distilled wisdom articulated in words or manifested silently in action. The space of retreat is a place of escape: the prisoner, the working person, the beleaguered mother, all find in the work of the intellect a dignity otherwise impinged upon by their surroundings.

It was not long ago widely taken for granted that intellectual activity benefited ordinary people. A.G. Sertillanges's classic handbook *The Intellectual Life* (1921) offered to nonacademics with intellectual interests, people with day jobs, a wealth of practical advice for their intellectual work along with soaring rhetoric to inspire and encourage them. It seems he thought the benefit of intellectual work too obvious to dwell much upon. Sertillanges wrote as publishers brought forth a great flood of inexpensive classics for the ordinary reader. The early twentieth century had its powerful, hard-nosed advocates of practice over theory and its fantasy-driven evangelists of technology. Still, it seems evident that, in the age of Everyman's Library and reading clubs at the Mechanics Institute, publishers, academics, and grassroots organizers built and defended forms of intellectual life that went deep to the bottom of things and reached out to the broadest of audiences. Even the activists of the early twentieth century did homage to the democracy of serious inquiry: Marxists went to the poorest areas and taught anyone

who would listen intricacies of Hegel and Feuerbach that a modern-day professor would tremble to assign to undergraduates.

The laughing prisoners Sullivan saw found their humanity in the midst of a subhuman existence. Intellectual life, by long tradition, is also a stronghold for the humanity of prisoners. Viktor Frankl claimed that it was the prospect of continuing his intellectual work that kept him alive in the concentration camp. It is not hard to see why this type of work had an advantage over kinds of work that are bound into fragile communities. For one's life to have meaning thanks to practicing law or running a business requires an already thriving community, a prospect not available to the outcasts of war or civil conflict. Irina Dumitrescu writes of Romanian political prisoners who taught each other Morse code and tapped out poetry through the walls. In Alex Haley's version of his life, Malcolm X immersed himself in the prison library and was transformed from a common criminal into an advocate for racial justice, an activist who maintained enough inwardness to undergo the major change in view that cost him his life.

In the face of these examples, to justify intellectual activity in terms of its economic and political benefits, as do contemporary defenders of the humanities and liberal education, might seem banal or beside the point. But it is worse than that: such defenses are false and destructively so. For intellectual life to provide the human benefit it provides, it must be in fact withdrawn from considerations of economic benefit or from social and political efficacy. This is in part because, as the little human things testify, a human being is more than an instrument of personal or public benefit. Intellectual life is a source of human dignity exactly because it is something beyond politics and social life. But withdrawal from the world is also necessary because intellectual life is an ascetic practice.

Our desires for truth, for understanding, for insight, are in constant conflict with other desires: our desires for social acceptance or an easy life, a particular personal goal or a desirable political outcome. Hence the retreat that intellectual work requires does not function only as an escape. It is also a place of salutary distance, a place to set aside our agendas to consider things as they really are. When we think, consider, and reflect, we struggle to allow our desire for truth to prevail over the desires that conflict with truth. We push aside the soft barriers and chip away at hard accretions of wishful thinking. It is for this reason that intellectual life is a discipline: the product of hard work and practice in a certain sort of self-denial. Everyone with even a passing interest in the life of the mind has felt such a movement. The term paper begins with dreams of academic conquest and ends in lowly entanglement with the real problems the topic presents.

The self-denial that the intellect demands also forges new kinds of human connection and community. The most unbearable person at the seminar table can put a finger on something true. Through the intellect we connect with people who would otherwise be strangers or enemies: witness the international cooperation of scientists, or friendships formed by correspondence, or two bookworms quietly finding common ground in a status-driven high school cafeteria.

Human beings need to be reminded that they are more than vehicles of social utility. They need to set aside considerations of utility to see how things really are. But they also need to connect with one another in terms of a shared good. Intellectual communities, in this way, are like any communities structured by real work, by the shared pursuit of something beneficial. The beneficial includes the useful, but also what lies beyond the useful, in idleness, leisure, play, and quiet reflection.

Where our lives and opinions go to die

How can we reconcile the real value of intellectual life with the duties created by political and social urgencies? The tension has some of its roots in the reliance of politics on determinate judgments of value, on firmly held beliefs. One of the remarkable features of the picture of intellectual life painted by Rose's book or found in the lives of prisoners is how little it has to do with correct opinions. The intellectual realm is a place of wonder, awe, and insight; a place of deep realities beyond the "small utilities" of ordinary life; and a place where what it means to be a human being is sought out, with however much difficulty and facing however many illusions. In these contexts the intellectual life shows its true colors: where our opinions go to die, lost in inquiries that are as open-ended as they are serious, lost in the splendor of intellectual objects, natural, mathematical, human, or divine.

The critic Robert Heilman argues that good literature is distinguished by the complexity of its moral situations: it breaks down our natural urges to divide ourselves from our opponents and hold ourselves superior to them. *Pride and Prejudice* appeals to our hatred of snobbery while challenging it, forcing us both to sympathize with Elizabeth Bennett and to see that she is in the wrong. This is a general feature of intellectual life: it throws a wrench into the inner machinery of faction, just as it breaks down the agenda-driven hope and the self-interested conclusion.

The machinery of faction is roaring along these days, and it is strange to hear calls for more fuel, as if it did not take care of itself quite well on its own. But if politics is fueled by our natural impulses to division, resentment, and self-righteous judgment, it makes little sense to condemn it outright. The realm of political and moral action requires factions, even if it also needs the

shared principles of common life that are now so endangered. Political life should not be abandoned in search of human perfection, any more than the realm of the intellect should be abandoned because of the self-absorption of intellectuals. The natural vices of politics, like the natural vices of intellectual life, point rather to the pursuit of a sort of personal and social ecology where different human practices are each balanced against the other, the pitfalls of one activity undermined by the virtues of another.

The standard of balance in this human ecology is the standard of the human good, which seeks laughter and leisure as earnestly as it demands their material and social conditions.

But we need to determine with a cold eye which human forces run on their own power and which need careful cultivation and the deliberate devotion of resources. Under the category of the latter fall anything little, human, useless, or ascetical: recreation, the arts, religion, and intellectual life. The struggle for a just society is worthless if it costs us the fruits of justice.

Restoring a person-to-person calling

This essay might be accused of a certain pointless nostalgia. The age of mechanics' institutes seems vanished past recovery; prison education programs once blossomed and are now rare; and another essay could be written on the ever-shrinking mission of the public library. (I knew a Wall Street stockbroker who in his spare time did extensive research on Homer's *Iliad* at the New York Public Library. A protracted struggle over the research mission of the library has gone on for years, and its outcome, so far as I know, is still uncertain. Most libraries are not so well defended.)

University teaching is increasingly a high-wire act where one keeps a large room of

students entertained and adequately graded while trying to carve out a bit of space to pass on to the few and interested the things one really cares about. In the search for measurable outcomes and results, we drive the human factor out of teaching and send young scholars to churn out article after article, book after book, as if the purpose of publication lay in numbers of pages rather than in the continued pursuit of understanding. The growing class of adjuncts is not an outlier but an emblem of the contemporary academic world: the subjection of the human being to measures of outcomes, measures that fail to mask the swift decrease in the ability of colleges and universities to meet the human needs of teachers and students alike.

Where in all of academic life is the real work, the provision of a piece of the human good? Surely our large lecture courses, our emphasis on a high volume of highly specialized publications, our struggles to keep ourselves on the arcane map of academic status distinctions, surely these all obscure our real task, if they do not make it impossible. Surely our institutions, however inadvertently, have evolved in a way that make our best impulses go against the grain.

Could it be that our activist tendencies, our self-doubt and our discontent, at bottom mourn the loss of a certain kind of person-to-person service, extended to anyone and everyone who might take an interest? Could we, too, find ourselves "making a difference" by lowering our sights to provide—not a magical world-saving device—but a little human thing, an essential retreat in times of difficulty, an inner space of solace and insight? If this is possible, we can recover our vocations, one way or another, through re-emphasizing teaching undergraduates, through removing from our teaching an absurd and distorting preoccupation with results, and by reaching out to the poor and the marginalized—not in the hopes of skimming the "leaders" off

the top, but because our little splinter of the human good belongs to them as well.

Can we say, with a humility as real as our confidence, that intellectual life usually isn't much, but it's all some people have? Can we drop the moral and political grandiosity and

its attendant grandstanding, and take up the simple work of public service? That is my deep hope. Join me in it. †

I am grateful to the students of Project Polity for a very helpful discussion of Sullivan's Travels.

Winter in July

David Middleton

Outside at dusk I see the dragonflies
Like bi-winged Great War airplanes banked away
To dive at quick mosquitoes lizards missed
With tongues flicking in noontide's baking blaze.

Soon night is regnant, tangled with her suns,
As I rock on a porch that slowly cools
And sip chill beer, watching pert mockingbirds
Dance-fighting on the lawn's high muggy grass.

Still basking in retirement's early days
Like afterglows of sex or good deep sleep
I mark the constellations, set adrift,
And think once more on first and final things,

The war dance of the darkness and the light
Enacted in the heavens and this yard
When crickets raise their mating cries and die
And Draco's winter glintings ice the stars.