Affirmative Case: Self-Actualization

Aeschylus wrote:

“There’s nothing certain in a man’s life except this: That he must lose it.”[[1]](#footnote-2)

In between birth and death, we have a limited number of days and no natural idea what to do with them. Kittens learn simply by living. Human children must study for years because their potential is much greater—and unlocking it is hard work.

That’s why I am *Resolved: In formal education, liberal arts ought to be valued over practical skills.*

# Value: Self-Actualization

Self-Actualization is a term put forward by philosopher Abraham Maslow to describe the highest need of humans. Oxford Dictionary defines it as: “The realization or fulfillment of one’s talents and potentialities, especially considered as a drive or need present in everyone.”

A simple way to think of it is: “Being your unique best self.”

## Value Link 1: Defining Life Goal

There is tremendous unique potential in each of us. In a single person, you may find boundless curiosity, a knack for numbers, a craving for respect, and a desire to build and take care of a family. Self-actualization takes all the unique aspects of your “self” and uses them to the best possible effect—in your family life, your friendships, your career, and so on.

## Value Link 2: Purpose of Education

Education is about formally preparing for the future. When a student begins the long process of education, the future is merely an ethereal crowd of possibilities. As they learn, they are given the keys to unlock their potential, the training to know what to expect and how to handle it, and how to lead the best possible life. If a student succeeds, the education was a success, and vice versa.

Now let’s talk about how to best promote self-actualization in my two contentions.

# Contention 1: Liberal Arts Enable Self-Actualization

Liberal arts train students to think for themselves, to understand themselves better, and to see the world as it really is. All of these skills are critical tools for self-actualization.

Making good life choices doesn’t happen by accident. We must be able to see the world and our place in it first.

## Application: Ethics

Living well is rarely simple. We’re forced to make difficult ethical decisions every day. Often, the more mundane they are, the more difficult they are to answer. For example, a working man with children at home might ask, “Should I come in on the weekend and earn more to provide for my family, or should I take the weekend off and get an irreplaceable day of memories with them?”

This is an example of a common ethical dilemma. Those without any philosophical training are helpless to answer them; they have to resort to fallback options like “going with one’s gut”—not exactly a recipe for a self-actualized life.

Learning to approach ethics in a moral fashion takes years of study. That’s why modern formal education gets started early by exposing kids to stories in which the main character is faced with an ethical dilemma. The study of literature and other art forms is critical to make the kind of balanced, healthy human being that can withstand the confusion and temptation of life.

# Contention 2: Practical Skills Don’t Enable Self-Actualization

Practical skills matter and ought to be part of formal education, but they can’t be the focus. There are two reasons for this.

## Sub-point A) Unguided Choice

Practical skills don’t teach you how to pick a career; they only offer you a menu of careers and say, “Pick one.” But if you don’t have the liberal arts training to understand yourself and your place in the world, your chance of picking a career direction that suits you is slim. This is like ordering from a menu by closing your eyes and pointing.

For some, a job in a practical skill offers the road to self-actualization. But here’s the critical insight: even those people need their choice to be guided by liberal arts. Put another way, everyone regardless of their unique potential must learn liberal arts, because liberal arts are the only way to discover and unlock that unique potential.

For every person you find who discovered a great practical skills job without liberal arts, you’ll also find hundreds of people in midlife crises wondering how it all went so wrong. Liberal arts are the only protection against that.

## Sub-point B) Potential Cap

Work is necessary and important. There is a dignity in honest hard work. But a human life is much bigger than work. Liberal arts teach us about all aspects of life—morality, creativity, love. Practical skills are woefully inadequate to the task. This is why practical skills take the back seat to liberal arts in formal education.

Bronnie Ware cared for dying people for years and heard the last regrets of many. She eventually published a book called, *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying*. Here are the top three:

1. “I wish I’d had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.”
2. **“I wish I didn’t work so hard.”**
3. **“I wish I’d had the courage to express my feelings.”**[[2]](#footnote-3)

There are powerful lessons to be learned from these regrets. Practical skills don’t teach you how to be your true self or express your true feelings or to choose the right work. All they teach you to do is make a living in whatever field you somehow selected.

You might learn the practical skill of accounting. You might become the greatest accountant the world has ever seen. But if, at the end of your life, all you can say is, “I was a great accountant,” you’ve missed your chance at self-actualization.

The role of practical skills is as a tool that many people use to actualize one aspect of their multifaceted potential. And remember, none of those facets can be properly understood without liberal arts.

We only live once. Let’s learn to become our best possible selves. Thank you.

1. Aeschylus, “Agamemnon,” circa 450 BC. <http://izquotes.com/quote/293586> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Bronnie Ware, reprinted with commentary by Courtney Boyd Myers, “The top 5 regrets people have on their deathbed” TNW News May 11, 2009. [*http://thenextweb.com/lifehacks/2011/05/31/the-top-5-regrets-people-make-on-their-deathbeds/1/*](http://thenextweb.com/lifehacks/2011/05/31/the-top-5-regrets-people-make-on-their-deathbeds/1/) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)