Affirmative Case: Shared Self

*McDonald’s. You Deserve a Break Today.*

*Maybach Zeppelin. Because You’re Worth It.*

*Eau de Parfum. Exceptional Because You Are.*

*P&O Ferries. You Deserve a Holiday.*

*Don’t Touch My Dodge Dart.*

You’re constantly bombarded with messages that tell you to think about yourself, to put yourself first, to consume, to not worry about everyone else. But if you focus on what makes you happy alone, you’ll wind up both unsuccessful and miserable. I suggest a new strategy: *In formal education, liberal arts ought to be valued over practical skills.*

Let’s start with a

## Definition

Liberal Arts is defined by the Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia as a:

“term originally used to designate the arts or studies suited to freemen. It was applied in the Middle Ages to seven branches of learning, the trivium of grammar, logic, and rhetoric, and the quadrivium of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. The study of the trivium led to the Bachelor of Arts degree, and the quadrivium to the Master of Arts. During the Renaissance, the term was interpreted more broadly to mean all of those studies that impart a general, as opposed to a vocational or specialized, education. This corresponds rather closely to the interpretation used in most undergraduate colleges today, although the curriculum of the latter is more flexible than that of the Renaissance university.”[[1]](#footnote-2)

I think it’s important to have this broad grasp of liberal arts as general skills needed to be a good citizen of a free society. We have many preconceived ideas about what education should look like. These ideas depend on our point of view. So let’s go to the most important part of the case:

# Value: Shared Self

Shared Self is operationally defined as: “A theory which acknowledges the group as the primary unit of identity and society, while the individual has little or no unique identity separate from the group and depends on the group for everything meaningful.”

The concept of Shared Self is easy to misunderstand. It can be incorrectly grouped with ideas like communism or nationalism. It is neither. Rather than mindless philosophy, it is an empowering and uplifting idea.

Think of it this way. I am a unique individual in the sense that no one else is quite like me. But I am defined by my membership with groups. I have a gender, a nationality, a religious affiliation, a hometown, a family, interests, hobbies, and so on. These all add up to make me who I am. Strip them away, and there is no core “Me” left over. Shared Self says that our identities are rooted in each other. Take away my groups, and I am fundamentally changed.

## Value Link: Basic Moral Principle

From his prison cell in Birmingham, Martin Luther King Jr. wrote these famous words: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”[[2]](#footnote-3) He was expressing the idea of Shared Self; he was saying that we cannot hurt one member of our community without harming the rest.

The Good Samaritan is not just elevated for helping a complete stranger; he is defined by it. He recognizes that the stranger in need is his neighbor. In helping the stranger, he is helping not *himself* but his Self – his core identity as a member of humanity. That’s a tough concept to grasp, but it’s important if we want to lead lives that touch and uplift and love others. When we fully grasp Shared Self, we witness the power of fully operational morality.

Shared Self is the reason it feels so good to give a gift or do a nice thing for someone. Individualists can’t explain that feeling; to them, we should only feel good when we act selfishly. But there is no true line between Self and Else unless we make one. When we give a gift, we are adding value and joy and love to the group, and that’s something we get to enjoy as a member of that group.

Shared Self is also the reason that oppression and slavery and genocide are irrational acts. When we harm someone else, we are also harming ourselves. We feel the disturbance when innocents are silenced. There is no difference between acting in self-interest and acting in the best interests of the group. The two are one.

What’s good for the flock is good for the goose. What’s good for the whole body is good for the mind. What’s good for the community is good for the person.

Now let’s apply this principle to formal education.

# Contention 1: Liberal Arts Apply Shared Self

Remember, liberal arts are general. They teach students how to become good members of free societies; in other words, they teach us how to contribute to our group selves.

Education cannot focus solely on the student. The student does not live alone on a remote water planet; the student is a part of many different groups and must learn how to contribute to each of them. That is what it means to lead a fulfilling life, and that is exactly what liberal arts teach.

## Application: Civics

Civics teaches students their rights and duties as citizens. It prepares them for the rigors of being a member of a nation in which they may be asked to serve in a host of ways: voting, serving on a jury, serving in the military, and so on.

Civics doesn’t have much to offer to an individualist. If we’re trying to better ourselves as distinct from the group, we shouldn’t have much interest in what other citizens need. From a Shared Self perspective on the other hand, going without an education in civics is not just uncivilized, it is a tragic mistake.

Nations rise by the education of their citizens, and fall by their ignorance. Everything else about our selves depends on being in a country of freedom and equality and opportunity. Knowledge lights the way to that kind of country.

# Contention 2: Practical Skills Do Not Apply Shared Self

Practical skills mean specialized vocational training. The study of practical skills apart from liberal arts comes from a worldview that’s focused on individual as the self. It asks: “What do you want to do? What job do you want?” Rather than the far more important question: “How can you serve others?”

This is a mindset that is advanced constantly in advertising and movies. We have learned to be individualists, to consume, to be happy by being our “true selves”—whatever that means. We must unlearn what we have learned. We must break free of the lie that we exist only to please ourselves.

Yes, practical skills are legitimate and even important for society. Some students should learn them, but only in order to serve others. Because the nature of practical skills is fundamentally not focused on Shared Self, it should not be valued over liberal arts. It should be a secondary concern. Again, many of the truths that we cling to depend on our point of view. Ours must be rooted in Shared Self and therefore focused on liberal arts.

The biggest problem in the universe is no one helps each other. By affirming the resolution, we prepare future generations to reverse that. Thank you.

--  
*This case was written by Travis Herche.*

1. “Liberal arts.” The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 2013. <http://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/Liberal-arts> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Martin Luther King Jr., Letter from Birmingham Jail, April 16, 1963. <http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/24974.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)