Mismeasuring Our Lives:

The Case against Usefulness, Popularity, and the Desire to Influence Others

Steven James Bartlett

Abstract

Early in 2008, in the early throes of the coming worldwide financial crisis, former French President Nicolas Sarkozy established a commission, led by Nobel laureates Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen and French economist Jean-Paul Fitoussi, to study whether Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is a valid measure of social and economic progress. In the Commission's report, *Mismeasuring Our Lives: Why GDP Doesn't Add Up* (Stiglitz, Sen, & Fitoussi, 2010), a new, alternative set of measures was proposed.

This essay revisits the question of how we should measure the things that matter, at a time when we continue to mismeasure our lives, as we hold fast to the outworn myths of usefulness, popularity, and the desire to influence others.

Three central, unquestioned presumptions have come to govern much of contemporary society, education, and the professions. They are: the high value placed on usefulness, on the passion to achieve popularity, and on the desire to influence others. In this essay, the psychologist-philosopher author makes the case against these presumptions, presumptions which lead to exclusionary commitments that stand in the way of human cultural development.

Keywords: usefulness, psychology of popularity, psychology of the desire to influence others, liberal arts, servile arts

MISMEASURING OUR LIVES:*

THE CASE AGAINST USEFULNESS, POPULARITY, AND THE DESIRE TO INFLUENCE OTHERS

STEVEN JAMES BARTLETT

Introduction

There are some social presumptions that are accepted unquestioningly to a degree that the great human majority follows them blindly and doggedly throughout life. Three of these presumptions provide the meat for this essay. It is my intention here not only to question these three restrictive and exclusionary presumptions, but to condemn them and to reject them, and, having done this, to point to an opposing set of values that should replace them in the minds of all those who are capable of initiating and cultivating this inner change.

To be clear, the case I wish to make is leveled against the *exclusionary* commitments that these three presumptions encourage. There is, to be sure, a value in usefulness, in popularity, and in the desire to influence others—these can be of value, but the value they have is, as we shall see, fundamentally exclusionary: These presumptions are limiting; they are restrictive; they function to exclude other commitments that are important to human development and to the development of human culture. It is their unmistakable exclusionary consequences against which the case here is made.

In making the case against usefulness, popularity, and the desire to influence others, it should be clear to the reader, upon a little reflection, that the potential merits of this case have little chance of receiving an impartial hearing given our society's current narrowly-focused, single-minded commitment to all three of these objectives. The case made here is

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< 2 >

further unlikely to succeed in bringing about change given society's normal rigid resistance and even hostility to attempts to subject its core presumptions to critical, rational, and sharpened evaluative judgment.

Social resistance and hostility have been common reactions throughout history when attempts are made to think critically, rationally, and evaluatively about deeply-seated, basic social presumptions that society wishes not to question. Such resistance and hostility are usually expressed in strong and passionate social denunciation—or worse—against those who think critically. But sometimes, when the presumptions have been so firmly set in cement in the majority of people, so much so that questioning them has become simply laughable, society is lulled into a state of indifference to such criticism, which can so easily be subjected to mockery and ridicule, or simply dismissed and safely ignored.

So it is in the present case: To make the case against usefulness, popularity, and the desire to influence others is to speak into a thundering headwind the noise of which drowns out the likelihood that we might think dispassionately about these now-profoundly ingrained presumptions.

To acknowledge this fact is realism, but to accept it would be complicity and weakness. Here, we shall ignore the headwind and thunder.

Usefulness

A human life spans only a brief interval of time but still it is possible within that short period to gain some understanding of what has gone before, and in that light to recognize patterns of thought and behavior that characterize the present, and even to foresee, in some instances and to some extent, how those patterns are likely to persist. The present global infatuation with usefulness has reached a peak of historical intensity, and it is an infatuation not likely to ebb. The global economy, a nation's economy, and an individual's financial well-being are now firmly wrapped and constricted in a Gordian Knot whose rope is the high value placed upon usefulness. We all know this, and most of us, far from questioning the social imperative of usefulness, accept it, structure our educations and professional lives around it, and die with our usefulness as our last judgment of a life well-lived.

We do not often derogate and devalue usefulness, but this I want to do. To be a slave to usefulness is to be a slave to the ordinary, to things and how to make more things, better things, and how to keep those things working. It is to devote one's interests, attention, time,

< 3 >

and labor to activities and work that people, including nearly all of us, consider to be useful. And, to be sure, usefulness takes many forms, from diapers to coffins, from medicines to therapies to help treat, maintain, or improve our physical and emotional existence, from products to services that bring us gratification, make daily life easier, more comfortable, even luxurious. We know all about these gratifications and there is no need to say more about them here.

Except to place them in a different perspective, a perspective that can be developed on a higher level than the ordinary, a level not subject to the smallness, the pettiness, the ordinariness, the transitoriness of mere daily existence. It is, I have learned, hard for most people to conceive of, much less develop, a persistent personal sense of dissatisfaction and even disdain for what is "merely transitory" and "mundane." After a more than adequate number of years of university teaching, the opinion I reached is that only in comparatively few individuals is it possible for them—as a result of any teaching efforts—to recognize the fundamental unsatisfactoriness of a life devoted to impermanent things, transitory concerns, commonplace thoughts, all packed together within a handful of decades of adult existence that consists for the most part of repetitive routines and mind-dulling absorptions. Apart from the few who can be reached in this way through teaching, there are a good many more who appear to be born with a perspective that sees the transitory and ordinary as the basic ingredients of mediocrity, and who then decide to live a life in which those dulling and commonplace things do not consume the entirety of life, but only that portion that is unavoidable.

And so it is not my objective as I make the case against usefulness somehow to communicate to and thereby bring about in the reader a transformation of perspective that this writer has come to recognize does not, for all intents and purposes, lend itself to transmission. What I do wish to do is to underscore that dissatisfaction with the mundane and impermanent is, nevertheless, not a complete rarity among people. It is found especially among mathematicians, among some philosophers, among some artists and creative writers, and among some scientists.

The perspective to which I wish to draw attention is often mistakenly associated with religion, especially theistic religion that emphasizes the otherworldliness of a permanent and eternal heaven and of the one or more deities that are believed to inhabit it. But as I shall

< 4 >

make clear, the perspective that is central to the case against usefulness is neither religious in its accessibility nor in its content.[1]

We turn to consider those mathematicians, philosophers, artists, creative writers, and scientists among whom are to be found perhaps the greatest number of individuals dissatisfied with impermanence and mundanity, individuals who devote their work without regard, and often with *intentional disregard*, to its usefulness. I begin with the proud admission by the famous mathematician G. H. Hardy:

> I have never done anything "useful." No discovery of mine has made, or is likely to make, directly or indirectly, for good or ill, the least difference to the amenity of the world. (Hardy, 1940, p. 49)

This disinterest in the useful is characteristic of many mathematicians, especially those whose research has to do with "pure" mathematics, that is, higher mathematics that is exceedingly abstract, wholly separable and divorced from potential physical, engineering, or other applications.

Among philosophers who have expressed an avowed disinterest in usefulness, Bertrand Russell expressed the following credo:

> Let us admit that, in the world we know, there are many things that would be better otherwise, and that the ideals to which we do and must adhere are not realized in the realm of matter. Let us preserve our respect for truth, for beauty, for the ideal of perfection which life does not permit us to attain, though none of these things meet with the approval of the unconscious universe.... In action, in desire, we must submit perpetually to the tyranny of outside forces; but in thought, in aspiration, we are free, free from our fellow men, free from the petty planet on which our bodies impotently crawl, free even, while we live, from the tyranny of death. Let us learn then, that energy of faith which enables us to live constantly in the vision of the good; and let us descend, in action, into the world of fact, with that vision always before us. (Russell, 1957, pp. 107-108)

In literature, we find Noble Prize winning novelist Hermann Hesse's autobiographical maxim for living, closely related to Russell's:

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[1] In making the case against usefulness, I do not want to straddle two horses in an attempt also to make the case against theistic religion. Having mentioned mathematics, I will make recourse here to a common mathematical practice, that of referring to a result previously obtained: For readers curious to consider the case against theism, see Bartlett (2016); however, readers should be forewarned that the case I have made applies equally to theists, atheists, and agnostics. I have no ax to grind with theists, only with all those who are either theists, atheists, or agnostics.

< 5 >

I consider reality to be the thing one need concern oneself about least of all, for it is, tediously enough, always at hand while more beautiful and necessary things demand our attention and care. Reality is that which one must not under any circumstances worship and revere, for it is chance, the refuse of life. And it is in no wise to be changed, this shabby, consistently disappointing reality, except by our denying it and proving in the process that we are stronger than it. (Hesse, 1954/1925, p. 67)

In a similar vein, T. E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) wrote in his *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*:

To bring forth immaterial things, things partaking of spirit, not flesh, we must be jealous of spending time or trouble upon physical demands, since in most men, the soul ages long before the body. Mankind has been no gainer by its drudges. (Lawrence, 1952, Book Six, Chap. LXXIV)

Virtually all branches of science have now been penetrated and dominated by industrial and engineering concerns that have useful applications in view. Nevertheless, even so, pure scientific research manages to continue, though it often is forced for its survival to masquerade under the radar with promises of commercial applicability.

In physics, Einstein's central research motivation was to find invariant, permanent physical laws—universal principles whose validity is absolute and unchanging. This fact is of course contrary to the connotation that the term 'relativity' has unfortunately suggested to many: Later in his life Einstein himself regretted the choice of the phrase "relativity theory" and felt that "*Invariantentheorie*" or "invariance theory" would have been more appropriate.[2] Among modern physicists with a dedication to pure research for its own sake, without concern for its usefulness, Einstein was certainly one of them:

I believe ... that one of the strongest motives that lead men to art and science is to escape from everyday life with its painful crudity and hopeless dreariness, from the fetters of one's own every-shifting desires. A finely tempered nature longs to escape from the personal life into the world of objective perception and thought. (Einstein, quoted in Regis, 1987, p. 43)

Other voices come to mind that have expressed the same refrain; they include that of theoretical physicist Nicholas Rashevsky, often considered the father of mathematical biophysics. Rashevsky remarked that the need to devote time and energy to life's mundane

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[2] In a letter to E. Zschimmer dated September 30, 1921, Einstein wrote: "Now to the name relativity theory. I admit that it is unfortunate, and has given occasion to philosophical misunderstandings.... The description you proposed ["*Invariantentheorie*"] would perhaps be better; but I believe it would cause confusion to change the generally accepted name after all this time." Cf. Holton (2006, p. 269), Nozick (2001, p. 78).

< 6 >

needs reduces an individual's freedom: "The less work a person has to perform to keep himself alive, the freer he is" (Rashevsky, 1947, p. 77). As Arthur Koestler observed in a similar way, quoting Aristotle: "[W]e call a man free who exists for his own ends and not for those of another..." (Koestler, 1964, p. 676).

Whether the individual is a mathematician, philosopher, artist or creative writer, or scientist, a life-commitment to things that are of value *in and of themselves*, without regard for their usefulness, has characterized the motivation of many exceptional contributors to human culture. In many of these outstanding people we find a deliberate investment of intellectual or artistically creative work in which concerns about that work's ability to meet utilitarian interests is absent.

The case against usefulness may be summed up in this way: To the extent that an individual's efforts are liberated from the narrow concerns of usefulness, to that extent can those efforts rise to a higher level that permits access to universality, invariance, certainty, and independence from the constraints of everyday, impermanent, and mundane preoccupations. It was once recognized that the *artes liberales*, the liberal arts, liberated a man or woman from the servile world, the ordinary world that is served by the *artes serviles*, by those human occupations that dedicate themselves to the interests of usefulness. In medieval European universities, the liberating arts comprised both the trivium of grammar, rhetoric, and logic, and the quadrivium consisting of geometry, arithmetic, music, and astronomy. These subjects were taught, studied, and learned free of an overriding interest in their utilitarian application in the everyday world. These were not only, as Cicero expressed this, the "*artes quae libero sunt dignae*," the arts that are worthy of a free man, they were the arts, the ways to devote life, that permitted the individual to become free; they comprised the cultural paths to emancipation from mediocre concerns with usefulness; in short, they comprised what the Scholastics identified as "*culture*" (from *cultus*), a word we have now rendered indiscriminately meaningless by applying it to patterns of interaction found in sports teams, businesses, and kindergartens.

Today, disciplines such as mathematics, philosophy, fine art and literature, and the sciences still—in principle—offer access to culture in its substantive sense, but it has become increasingly challenging in today's usefulness-dominated world to find and then to enter the door to genuine culture. To find and to enter that door, and then to explore what lies beyond it, has become harder precisely to the degree that it has become harder to

< 7 >

cultivate "leisure," also in its classical meaning.[3] Leisure, as Josef Pieper recognized in his little book with this title, is the basis of culture.[4] The cultivation of leisure by means of the liberating arts is, on a fundamental level, at odds with the pursuit of usefulness. The choice between the one and the other is a choice between servility to a mundane and often mediocre world, and a level of thinking and of creativity that brings one into contact with enduring realities that are of value in and of themselves, and not because they are useful.

Popularity

Popularity is the second social presumption that I want to question, oppose, condemn, and reject, and in its place suggest how that presumption can be replaced in those who are capable of accomplishing this.

Popularity is a familiar idea, but we need to be clear about the particular meaning of popularity that we'll have in view here. By 'popularity' we commonly mean the relationship that a person has to others when he or she is liked or admired by many of them. Popularity in this sense has to do with the *number* of people involved—the more admirers, the greater the person's popularity. The term derives from the Latin word '*popularitas'* which means the courting, the active seeking, of popular favor. The word as I will use it in what follows has both of these two intertwined meanings: being liked or admired by numerous people (the more the better), and the active practice of seeking their admiration. Basic to acquiring popularity requires, as a prerequisite, that numerous others *recognize* the person who seeks to be liked. This preliminary recognition usually takes the form of recognizing that the person in question is accepted as a member of the group of people from whom admiration is sought.

Popularity serves a number of different roles in both the individual and in society. In the individual, popularity serves to buttress and strengthen the individual's sense of self-worth and thereby to increase self-confidence. It also serves to encourage the individual to experience the comfort of belonging to a group, and by doing this popularity extends the boundaries of the self to include others.

From the standpoint of society, the attraction of popularity serves as a glue to bring about social cohesion, to encourage the individual person to become part of the mass. It also

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[3] For detailed analyses of contemporary society's and higher education's blocks to the higher-order reality of culture, see Bartlett (1990, 1993, 1994a, 1994b).
[4] See Pieper (1963/1948, also 1986/1977).

< 8 >

serves to bring about conformity, since the individual who seeks popularity is motivated to adopt the patterns of thought, behavior, and appearance of others in his or her popularity group. In addition to promoting social cohesion and conformity, the social role of popularity is to establish implicit and explicit boundaries that function as limits beyond which those who are caught up in the dynamic of popularity cannot trespass without censure from their group.

Let us look more closely at these roles of popularity.

The psychology that motivates people to seek popularity

We'll call people who value and strive for popularity "popularity-seeking." Those who are popularity-seeking feel in need of the reinforcement that popularity provides them, to strengthen their sense of identity, self-esteem, and self-assurance. To put this negatively, the popularity-seeking individual experiences needs for the external buttressing of the self to the degree that he or she would feel weaker, less valuable, more vulnerable, less adequate, and less resolute without that external reinforcement.

In this context, the need for popularity is a direct consequence of a usually inchoate consciousness of inner deficiencies and the need to fill an emptiness in life. Such consciousness seldom rises to the surface to become explicit since it is in the popularity-seeking person's self-interest not to become aware of his or her personal shortcomings. Understood on this level, the drive to obtain popularity—in whatever measure, whether it is recognition and admiration by friends, professional colleagues, social network contacts, or the general public—expresses a component of weakness.

The popularity-seeking individual unquestionably receives benefits from popularity. Chief among these is acknowledged membership in a group. As we have seen, group membership serves to extend the boundaries of the self to include others. As the process of obtaining and receiving membership in a group progresses, the popularity-seeking person gains, bit by bit, an expanded sense of his or her identity. The group identity that comes to be felt by such a person can then serve to supplement, then to override, and eventually to substitute for that individual's private sense of personal identity. Usually this process begins to occur during the very early childhood years, so that the person's "private sense of identity" is never adequately formed, and when it sometimes has had a chance to form, it tends gradually to be over-written and forgotten.

< 9 >

The social functions of popularity

We have already briefly identified three social functions of popularity: to bring about social cohesion, social conformity, and to establish boundaries beyond which the popularity-seeking cannot trespass without punishment from the groups in which they are members.

Social cohesion is socially desirable: To the extent that social cohesion is realized, it makes governing a large population more efficient because the population can be treated, and it will respond, as a unified mass. The population's responses become more predictable, and the thought and behavior of the people can be more effectively managed.

Social conformity contributes to social cohesion, as does cohesion to conformity. A dynamic system is established whereby members of a society's population seek to think, behave, and appear like one another. There is a strong element of energy efficiency in such a system: From the popularity-seeking individual's standpoint, conformity saves him or her time and energy that would otherwise be expended to think individually, to make individual behavioral decisions, and to attend to his or her circumstances in an individualized manner. Conformity is a great time and energy saver. The person for whom popularity is a felt need greedily embraces imitating others in his or her group—copying everything from a very limited vocabulary and a high frequency of repetitive favored-word usage, to copied inflection, voice tonality, non-verbal behaviors, ways of interpreting information and events, copying socially approved ideas and preferences, manner of dress, choice of profession, choice of mate, choice of housing, and so on—in short, conformity conserves a great deal of energy while at the same time it insulates the individual from experiencing the anxiety and effort of individualized decision-making.

The third function of popularity, to establish boundaries that cannot be trespassed without incurring some variety of pain inflicted by the individual's group, exerts by far the most powerful influence of the three functions of popularity: The restrictive boundaries that are set in place confine those who seek popularity to his or her group's preferred practices and beliefs. It is no coincidence that of the Ten Commandments, eight are boundary injunctions that state "Thou shall *not*." Most traffic rules similarly specify what is *not permitted*. In the academic and scientific worlds, peer review serves to establish limits of acceptability of research and its publication, conclusions drawn from research, and the range of

< 10 >

applications to which such research may be put.[5] The Catholic Church's *imprimatur*, its stamp of approval, functions similarly to enforce limiting boundaries of acceptability, as do the pledges of allegiance of nations, and as do many other socially restrictive limitations, from policies that protect national security through secrecy, to contracts to guard proprietary business designs and procedures.

In all of these cases, the popularity-seeking person will comply with eagerness to stay within the boundaries of acceptability established by his or her group.

The popularity-independent person

Up to this point, the case I wish to make against popularity has been limited to psychological and social description, much of this negatively descriptive, emphasizing the undesirable aspects both of the psychology of those who seek popularity and of the social functions of popularity. In making any case in opposition, it is both appropriate and customary to identify, emphasize, and weigh such negative factors. To make a case against something *is* to construct a one-sided argument. When presumptions are left unquestioned, there is a need to bring them into the light of day, to evaluate them reflectively, and to do this, an effective way to gain distance from them is to consider the case that can be made against them.

In order to balance the negative aspects of popularity, we need a counter-weight. Let us call the popularity-independent person—the individual who does not seek the gratifications of popularity because he or she does not feel a need for them—"an independent," someone, that is, whose individual psychology and whose orientation toward the prevailing society are, in important ways, not determined either by the psychological need for popularity, nor by social pressures to cohere, conform, or comply.

Individuals who are independent in this sense tend to be found comparatively rarely in contemporary society. Historically, they have never comprised a large percentage of any population, but today's social and economic pressures have combined in an especially strong force that is exerted to produce "productive"—that is, "useful"—members of society, and to produce people who seek popularity, who facilitate the cohesiveness of society through their need for group membership and group conformity. Genuinely independent individuals, as we shall see in a little more detail later, are not only uncommon, but exceptional in several specific ways.

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[5] On the detrimentally restrictive nature of peer review and editorial bias, see Bartlett (2011, Chap. 7, and 2016).

< 11 >

The Desire to Influence Others

By "the desire to influence others" I mean the desire to exercise power over the minds or behavior of others, to persuade others in any of a variety of ways, with one or more of the following objectives in view: (1) to obtain a group's or the public's recognition of one's personal value or, derivatively, recognition of one's personal value as expressed through one's work and achievements; (2) to receive group recognition of one's importance when compared with others, usually in the form of respect for one's greater authoritativeness and reputation, and, derivatively, (3) therefore to obtain the group's recognition of one's dominance or ascendency in a certain area of endeavor; (4) to receive the awareness from others coupled with one's own self-awareness that one is working to be of "service to humanity," contributing to the well-being of others, to human knowledge, etc.; and (5) to receive the self-validation obtained from convincing the self of its value through the acceptance and approval of other members of one's group obtained in the previous four ways.

The desire to influence others commonly has these five objectives. All comprise sources of gratification that a person normally receives when he or she is able to achieve these objectives. All are attempts to extend the boundaries of the self, as we saw in connection with the popularity-seeker's desire for popularity. All are attempts to expand one's self-identity and valuation of self through external recognition and approval.

The following central unquestioned presumption in Western societies has acquired the status of compelling dogma or social imperative: that it is essential to be a "productive member of society," that it is vital that one "contribute to the well-being of others," that "service to humanity," "service to one's nation," "community service," "public service" are unquestionably important ends-in-themselves. In this way, the presumption of usefulness takes the form of "social service"—that is, of willing servility to social ends.

In the discussion earlier in this essay that touched on some of the challenges facing the liberal arts, I mentioned the *artes serviles* in passing. The economies of industrialized countries are quickly becoming service economies, that is, economies dedicated to servility, to servile ends. As we have seen, the service-directedness of society has become a dominant force even in connection with disciplines whose traditional focus was not utility or service, but rather the extension of inquiry and creative work on a cultural level that recognized the

< 12 >

intrinsic value of such effort. The increasing insistence by society upon service, whether to humanity generally, or to one's group, company, or nation, is a direct consequence of the elevation of usefulness as the principal purpose of human work, fused with a psychology of popularity-seeking and the social functions served by the high value placed upon popularity.

The desire to influence others has been a natural and foreseeable extension of the presumptive importance of usefulness and popularity. The desire to influence others, to achieve the five objectives we have noted, is a direct logical, psychological, and sociological sequel to the presumptions that usefulness and popularity are unquestionable *sine qua non*s of the purpose of living.

As an uncritically believed social presumption, the desire to influence others stands in need of evaluation. It can be assessed in several ways. Here, we look at some of these:

How do people come to evaluate the worth of their lives and of their work? With "service to others" unquestioningly applied as a standard, their evaluative judgments of a life well lived to good purpose commonly make use of a simple measure according to which, for example, the degree of one's contribution to one's marriage or family receives high marks, as does the degree of one's contribution to a business, profession, research area, or field of creative effort.

In scientific and academic work, evaluative judgment of the worth of one's efforts also presumes that "service to others"—in combination with popularity—are unquestionable imperatives and constitute supremely important personal objectives. As a result of these presumptions, a new area of evaluation has developed that reflects the enormously high valuation placed on popularity and the influence of others: it is called "*citation analysis*." Citation analysis is defined as "[t]he process whereby the impact or 'quality' of an article is assessed by counting *the number of times* other authors mention it in their work."[6] Several methods have now been devised that place both (1) a numerical rating on a scholar's or a scientist's work as judged by *how often* others refer to it—that is, *how well-liked* it is (its popularity), and *how useful* it seems to others (its perceived usefulness)—and (2) a *numerical rating* of the publications in which he or she has published (in this case the popularity and perceived usefulness of the particular journals in which the individual has published). The quantitative urge to measure research and publications through the filters of usefulness and

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[6] Quotations in this and the next paragraph are taken from "Measuring Your Impact: Impact Factor, Citation Analysis, and other Metrics: Citation Analysis," http://researchguides.uic.edu/c.php?g=252299&p=1683205. Italics added.

< 13 >

popularity of an author's work is combined with additional filters that purport to quantify the so-called "impact factor" of professional journals, that is "the frequency with which the 'average article' in a journal has been cited in a particular year or period."

Citation analysis claims to provide people with easy-to-look-up numerical ratings whereby they can conveniently pre-judge the *presumed* "quality" of the work of others by means of the citation score of any author. At the time of this writing, a more sophisticated "*h-index*" has been devised and is in vogue: It is "an author-level metric that attempts to measure *both* the productivity and citation impact of the publications of a scientist or scholar. The index is based on the set of the scientist's most cited papers and the number of citations that they have received in other publications."

Impact factors and citation scores are among the most visible, the most prominent, and the most hyper-vigilant expressions in science and academia of the presumptive importance placed on usefulness and popularity.

Are they valid measures of the value of one's life and of one's work? Is the degree to which a person is "of service to others" a valid measure? Is his or her popularity or the popularity of what he or she has published a valid measure? Should the degree that a person is useful to others and popular among others be considered valid, centrally important ways of evaluating the worth of a person and of his or her work?

These questions are, in a sense, self-answering: As long as the presumed standards or criteria of assessment are accepted, the results of their application will also be accepted. Can a standard like usefulness or popularity or influence upon others be justified? Such a standard is justified so long as it is employed to serve certain ends that we consider most important. It is, after all and in the end, our sets of objectives that determine, and that justify, the standards that we apply. As long as we remain committed to the objectives of usefulness, popularity, and influence on others, the standards that express these objectives will be thought to be justified.

There are, as I've tried to make clear, other standards, other measures, that can be chosen, other *arbiters* that enable us both to define what we consider most important, and to build our lives around what we therefore value most highly. In the choice between the *artes serviles* and the *artes liberales*, the choice is between service for the sake of others, on the one hand, and, on the other, cultivation of concerns that are intrinsically of value, and not for the sake of anything beyond them. It is a choice, on the one hand, between servility to the

< 14 >

everyday, very human, transitory, impermanent world of changing beliefs, circumstances, professional tastes, fashions, and paradigms, to which one can contribute one's service in a host of different ways, and, on the other hand, contact with and development of cultural concerns that are of value in and of themselves.

Servile contributions are undeniably important—the case I make against usefulness, popularity, and the desire to influence others does not claim that such contributions are without importance; as long as we have usefulness exclusively in view, such contributions are utterly important. Rather, the case I have made objects to the exclusionary value that is invested in usefulness, popularity, and the desire to influence others. An exclusionary value is one that blinkers the mind to alternative values; it imposes a willful insistence that what is identified as important, *is* all-important. The case I have made opposes those who are blind to the shortcomings and limitations of these three dogmas, dogmas that are now rigidly upheld with virtual unanimity by the populations of all industrialized countries. The case opposes those who resist a broader consciousness and meaning that can come from a life devoted to intrinsically valuable things.

In Conclusion

How, it is now natural to ask, is the independent individual, who does not seek popularity, to live and work in contemporary society? Given the widespread and compelling force exerted by the three presumptions I have opposed, how is the independent individual to find a way to cultivate interests and to dedicate his or her time and energy to pursuits that have no intended utilitarian value, receive little or no popular recognition or support, and are not motivated by a desire to influence others?

Life, as is universally admitted, is full of compromises and challenges. To live in a society dedicated, even obsessed, with usefulness, popularity, and the desire to influence others, poses a challenge with which the independent person must grapple, and in the process, unless he or she is born with a silver spoon in the mouth, he or she will be forced to compromise. Wallace Stevens is an example: He earned a good living as an insurance executive, yet found independent time and energy to devote to his work as an outstanding poet. Others find a path through life that gives them, perhaps only eventually, a degree of financial independence sufficient to support independent cultural interests and work. Still others are lucky enough to find their way into professions—for example, the world of dance,

< 15 >

sculpture, music, university teaching, scientific research—in which it may be possible, at least some of the time, to devote oneself to work that is of value in and of itself, and not because that work has real or potential usefulness, not because it will receive popular recognition and acclaim, and not because it expresses a desire to influence others.

Even in these professions, which are relatively "protected" from the cult of usefulness, popularity, and the desire to influence others, and in which vestiges of the classical liberal arts spirit can still be found, the individual may find that the compromises upon his or her intellectual and creative freedom prove to be too much: the obligations of committee, work group, and board meetings; of "university service" and "community service"; routine and at times mind-numbing, repetitive teaching; the challenge of daily close contact with usefulness- , popularity- , influencing-others-obsessed students, customers, or business associates; a system of research and publication ruled by popularity-driven peer review, editorial bias, impact factors, and citation scores — all of these compromises can come to be an excessive burden of servility.

For those who come to feel that these burdens are excessive, for such truly *independent* independents, the personal challenges can be especially significant. To continue culturally significant work outside of authorized, financially supported professions, the *independent* independent must, to use a phrase coined in connection with academic learning games, be "*autotelic*" — he or she must be able to set his or her own objectives (from the Greek, *telos*); to be self-motivating and self-actualizing, and to be capable of achieving self-chosen objectives without the support of popularity; and finally, to the extent that the truly independent are devoted to concerns that lie outside or beyond the mainstream of what is considered useful—judged in terms of prevailing fashion and preferred paradigms—they must be able to be self-sustaining. Such individuals must, so to speak, be maximally independent and maximally individual.

A Philosophical Postscript

Philosophers' views are often turned back on themselves and applied self-referentially to test their validity, especially when the views they express are very general. Having read this essay, the reader may well ask whether the essay itself was, in a self-referentially inconsistency way, intended by the author to be "useful," or whether the author thought the essay might be "popular" (or at least stir some kind of constructive response in the reader), or even whether

< 16 >

the author, in writing this essay, did so out of a desire to influence others. These are valid questions, and the answers that I give to them here are simple and honest:

In the prevailing climate dominated by the obsession with usefulness, of course this essay has, and can have, no sane pretentions of being useful. If anything, it intends to oppose the exclusionary value of usefulness, and to point in an altogether different direction, one whose value lies in its being separate from and autonomous of concerns with utility.

Similarly, given the prevailing multiple fixations upon popularity that we have identified — obsessions that seek membership in social groups and conformity to their ways of thinking and behaving, and obsessions with the psychological reinforcements and gratifications that come from the approval of popularity — any attempt to oppose the value of popularity should predictably be met by a response of *unpopularity*. When a social presumption has become so deeply entrenched that to question it seems ridiculous (and certainly the widespread mania for popularity has reached this degree of entrenchment), this essay, predictably, should not be popular. The author certainly did not presume it would be.

And then there is the question whether the author, deep down, did not write this essay in order to influence others. Here it is more difficult to change a reader's pre-judgment which might take the following form: "Anyone who writes anything for an audience is doing this in order to persuade the audience, in some way or other—to persuade readers, at the very least, to consider the possible validity of what the author has had to say, if not actually to be persuaded of its validity."

There is, I believe, no convincing response to a pre-judgment; it is a prejudicial belief that usually cannot be shaken by offering counter-reasons. For this very reason, instead, I offer only what I myself know to be an honest response: The essay was not in any sense written to influence others. It was written because the subject of the essay interests the author, the subject has an intrinsic interest, in and of itself, that is worth exploring, to test to what extent a solid case can be made against usefulness, popularity, and the desire to influence others. If I have done more than only this, it is entirely by accident and not intention.

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< 17 >

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< 19 >

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steven James Bartlett was born in Mexico City and educated in Mexico, the United States, and France. His undergraduate work was at the University of Santa Clara and at Raymond College, an Oxford-style honors college of the University of the Pacific. He received his master's degree from the University of California, Santa Barbara; his doctorate from the Université de Paris, where his research was directed by Paul Ricoeur; and he has done post-doctoral study in psychology and psychotherapy. He has been the recipient of many honors, awards, grants, scholarships, and fellowships. His research has been supported under contract or grant by the Alliance Française, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, the Lilly Endowment, the Max-Planck-Gesellschaft, the National Science Foundation, the Rand Corporation, and others.

Bartlett brings to his research and writing an unusual background consisting of training in clinical psychology, pathology, and epistemology. He is the author and editor of more than 20 books and monographs, and numerous papers and research studies in the fields of psychology, epistemology, and philosophy of science. He has taught at Saint Louis University and the University of Florida, and has held research positions at the Max-Planck-Institute in Starnberg, Germany and at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in Santa Barbara. He is currently Visiting Scholar in Psychology at Willamette University and Senior Research Professor at Oregon State University.

Willamette University hosts a website that provides information about the author and his research, and makes available a large number of his publications in free downloadable from: http://www.willamette.edu/~sbartlet.

Other collections of Bartlett's work may be found with the Social Science Research Network (SSRN): https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/cf_dev/AbsByAuth.cfm?per_id=2841437, and PhilPapers: https://philpapers.org/s/Steven%20James%20Bartlett

< 20 >