



An answer to the question: Why do I have to take this class? or, The Digress of Sentiment

Brent Adkins

Associate Professor of Philosophy, Roanoke College

Jordan Journal

You have no doubt been told since you were old enough to ask questions that there are no stupid questions. Or, perhaps you're familiar with the variant, "the only stupid question is the one you don't ask." It is unfortunate that I do not know the source of this advice, as it has long passed into the hoary halls of cliché and platitude. My fondest wish is that a time-machine might someday be invented so that I can discover the source of this sentiment and gleefully beat its originator in his most tender parts until he relinquishes the idiocy that has caused untold damage to education, the effects of which I see daily in the classroom. Among the reasons that this sentiment is so damaging is, first, that it is manifestly false. Examples of stupid questions could be multiplied without end: Why is it better to eat healthy food than poison? Does Wednesday always follow Tuesday?, etc. In fact, though I'm not of an empiric temper, if one were to count all the possible question and categorize them as either stupid or non-stupid, I suspect that the stupid questions would vastly outnumber the non-stupid questions. The second reason that assuming there are no stupid questions is damaging to education is that it destroys the very purpose of education. Without exaggeration one can straightforwardly and earnestly say that the sole function of education is to discriminate between stupid and non-stupid questions. The pedagogical efforts of millennia can distilled to this simple task. Assuming that there are no stupid questions, though, immediately renders this task and education itself irrelevant.

One of the most noxious fruits that keeps falling from the tree of stupid questions is: Why do I have to take this class? It is difficult to know whether the dominant taste of this fruit is its impudence or its ignorance, but both combine to hideously potent effect. Not only does the question brazenly display its stupidity, but it simultaneously puts the questioner in a position of superiority and judgment over the one being questioned. It is precisely at this point that the questioner feels as if he has taken control of his education, when in fact he has foreclosed on the very possibility of education. Education is not a smorgasbord in which one can rightly ask, "Why should I have to eat kippers with my breakfast?" Education is the process of continually refining one's power of discrimination. The student who asks, "Why do I have to take this class?" is a petulant child who wonders loudly why ice cream and candy shouldn't be the sum of every meal.

The fact of the matter is that most students enter college fundamentally misguided about the purpose of college. College is seen primarily as a means to an end. One goes to college in order to get a degree, because people with college degrees get higher paying jobs than those without college degrees. It is precisely this confusion that encourages the question: Why do I have to take this class? If one sees college as the means to more earning power, particular classes are judged by whether they contribute to this end or merely postpone it. When judged by this standard general studies classes tend to fare poorly. It is difficult to see

how knowing more about ancient civilizations or ethics contributes to one's earning power. One can be sure that during a job interview there will be no questions about the Punic wars, nor will one be asked to explain the difference between deontology and utilitarianism. The result of this line of thinking is students who are either openly hostile to general studies or are at best indifferent. Furthermore, these same students forget the material as soon as the class is over because there is no point in remembering something that doesn't contribute to getting a job.

If the question: Why do I have to take this class? arises from a misconception about the purpose of college, the obvious question is: What is the purpose of college? To be perfectly frank, the four-year ritual of college is very strange indeed, especially if its purpose is supposed to be professional training. It would be infinitely more efficient to train on the job. One would be earning money sooner, and all of one's training would be directly related to one's career. So, either college achieves its purpose in the longest and most inefficient way possible by requiring classes unrelated to one's career, or it has a purpose that is unrelated to professional training. I would like to argue for the latter, namely, that the purpose of college is not related to professional training.

This claim, however, only defines the purpose of college negatively. While it is helpful to know that the purpose of college *is not* related to professional training, it is even more helpful to know what exactly the purpose of college *is*. The fact of the matter is, as important as a career is it does not define who a person is. Of the 8,760 hours in a year only about 2,000 of these will be spent at one's job. The way one spends these 2,000 hours will be determined entirely by the policies and procedures of that institution, not by what one learns in college. If what one learns in college overlaps with these policies and procedures it will only be in the most general and abstract way. No, college is not directly concerned with those 2,000 hours. It is concerned with the other 6,760 hours in a year. In short, the purpose of college is concerned not with what one does for a living but who one is as a person. In short, the purpose of college is to make students better people.

Making one a better person, of course, has been the goal of education since the Ancient Greeks. The problem with this conception of education is that there is a great deal of dispute about what "better" means in this context. It is precisely for this reason that thinking in terms of education as discriminating between stupid and non-stupid questions is so fruitful. College then becomes a way to refine one's ability to distinguish between these two types of questions. This education is of course subdivided into the general and the specific. In your major you gain a very fine-grained appreciation of which questions are stupid and which are not within a particular academic discipline. General studies, on the other hand, and as the name implies, pursues discriminating between stupid and non-stupid questions in the much broader arenas of the humanities, sciences, and social sciences. To ask why do I have to take this class is a stupid question of the highest order because it seeks to eliminate whole swaths of inquiry in which one might develop the ability to discriminate between the stupid and non-stupid. In fact, such an attitude dooms one to continually asking increasingly stupid questions. No institution, whether local, national, secular, or religious, can long survive if its members cannot clearly see the difference between stupid and non-stupid questions. Why do you have to take this class? It's our only hope.