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If you want to run the world, …

OPINION
Sarah Churchwell

1 Recently the financier Bill Miller donated $75m to the study of philosophy at Johns Hopkins University. The size of the gift made headlines, but few stopped to remark on the other surprise in the story: that someone who studied philosophy went on to create a fortune estimated at about $1bn — and thought this study valuable enough to encourage others to do the same.

2 Mr Miller is anomalous, obviously. If you really want to understand how to create an enormous fortune from nothing, you should look to someone like George Soros, who studied . . . philosophy. Or consider billionaire investor Carl Icahn, who resigned last year as an adviser to Donald Trump over potential conflicts of interest. He graduated from Princeton with a thesis on "The Problem of Formulating an Adequate Explication of the Empiricist Criterion of Meaning": another philosopher. Clearly not all philosophers are moral philosophers. But they know how to think.

3 The brain is like any other muscle: working it makes it stronger, faster, more flexible. Being able to hypothesise, think conditionally and reason inductively as well as deductively are all features of the theoretical training that goes on in good humanities departments — and not only there. The most advanced work in mathematics moves away from real numbers toward imaginary and irrational numbers. That's where the difficult thinking occurs: in the realm of the imaginary, which is by no means antithetical to the logical.

4 The division between the arts and the sciences is itself **__17__**. The word 'art' borrows from the old French for 'method' or 'knowledge'. The word 'science' also comes from the old French for knowledge. It was during the Enlightenment that the idea of a 'liberal education' took hold: the great philosopher-scientists invented both our modern conception of the sciences and of the arts. In most US universities, a 'liberal arts' degree still requires that graduates obtain credits in both arts and sciences.

5 As robots take over routine jobs, we will need people who can think creatively, imaginatively, logically and laterally. Acquiring a narrow

'skillset' of the kind society increasingly demands will, in fact, leave students not equipped for the future, but vulnerable to it. This, however, appears not to be the view of the UK government. Robert Halfon, former minister of state for education, announced this week that all courses "should be about high-skilled employability". He added: "If someone wants to do medieval history that's fine . . . But all the incentives from government and so on should go to areas the country needs and will bring it most benefit." We are endlessly told that humanities degrees are useless. Why study the past? Mostly because that's all we've got. You can't actually study the future ─ you can only imagine it.

6 Mr Halfon himself must have studied something useful to become an MP. Indeed he did: politics. Emmanuel Macron, French president, also studied philosophy ─ and likes to quote it, too. PPE, the degree taken by scores of leading British politicians over the past 50 years, stands for philosophy, politics and economics.

7 Angela Merkel, Germany's chancellor, may seem an exception, with a PhD in quantum chemistry. Yet studying quantum anything is mostly theoretical, by definition. So the distinction is not between 'useful' and 'useless' degrees, but between narrow skill-based training and theoretical, independent, evidence-based thinking. Even Mr Trump got an economics degree, although he chose a business school that offers a 'useful' major in real estate studies. With all due respect to real estate studies, Mr Trump does not strike most people as very well educated.

8 The conclusion doesn't require a philosophy degree. If you want to get a job, study something 'useful'. If you want to run the world, get a liberal education.

The writer is chair of public understanding of the humanities at the School of Advanced Study, University of London

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