

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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## EVERYBODY'S BUSINESS

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Part 2 of 4

### II *THE WRONG AND THE RIGHT WAY TO CONCEIVE HUMANISTIC LEARNING*

A. As currently stated in this century, and in most academic circles, the problem of the relation between the humanities and the sciences has no good solution. We are asked to choose between what, in my judgment, are equally undesirable alternatives.

1. Shall we place primary emphasis on the academic departments that are currently classified, as humanities (literature, language and philology, history, philosophy and the fine arts)?
2. Or on another set of academic departments currently classified as the sciences (the social and behavioral sciences, history considered as a social science, together with the natural sciences and mathematics)?
3. This does not present us with what should be the basic choice between a humanistic and non-humanistic approach to the elements of culture, but only a choice between two sets of equally specialized disciplines, one based on the methods of non-scientific scholarship, the other on the methods of scientific research.

And in both cases the highly specialized techniques of research associated with these disciplines

4. Confronted with these options, my response is: *a plague on both your houses!*
  - a. This is a choice between tweedle-dum and tweedie-dee
  - b. What is represented here is not, as C. P. Snow would have it two cultures—but one culture, or, as I think It

is more accurate to say, no culture at all—but a multiplicity of fragments that do not constitute a culture.

B. I would, therefore, like to propose another set of alternatives. When stated in the terms that I propose, there is no problem to be solved, for the choice to be made is dictated by the alternatives as stated.

1. The dividing line that I would draw is between
  - what is everybody's business, on the one hand
  - and
  - what is the business only of the specialist, the expert, or the professional, on the other.
2. Another way of stating this division is as follows:
  - a. The learning of the generalist, together with the general skills or arts appropriate to the acquirement of such learning
  - b. The knowledge of the specialist, together with the specialized skills or techniques appropriate to the development of such knowledge
3. To the first of these—the learning of the generalist—I would give the name “humanities,” or if you will
  - humanistic and philosophical learning, together with the liberal arts
  - everybody's business
4. To the second of (these—the knowledge of the specialist—I would give the name “sciences,” including here
  - not only the academic departments ordinarily classified, as the physical, biological, and social or behavioral sciences
  - but also the academic departments that represent specialized or professionally expert scholarship in
    - literature and philology
    - history
    - philosophy
    - the fine arts
5. Please note that the current academic names for the disciplines do not by themselves indicate on which side of the dividing line a particular subject-matter falls. Thus:

- a. Taught or pursued in a certain way—the way that makes them everybody’s business—the sciences and mathematics fall on the side of humanistic or philosophical learning.
- b. Taught or pursued in a different way—the way that makes them, not everybody’s business, but only the business of this or that branch of highly specialized, expert, or professional scholarship—literature and the other arts, history, and philosophy belong with the sciences rather than with the humanities.

C. From the Greeks until modern times—

in fact, until the 19th, century, when the modern university with its professional departments and its professors of this or that, its Ph.D.’s —began to dominate both the educational scene and the culture of our society—

the distinction between the learning of the generalist and the knowledge of the specialist was understood and acknowledged, though not always with the same degree of clarity or with a full recognition of its significance.

1. We owe the first clear statement of the distinction, as we owe most of our fundamental insights, to Aristotle.
  - a. The distinction is made in the opening chapter of the first book of his treatise *On the Parts of Animals*.
  - b. The Greek words that Aristotle used to make the distinction, and the meanings he assigned to them, are as follows
    - (1) On the one hand, *episteme* (which in Latin becomes *scientia*, and in English “science”)—
 

this Aristotle regarded as the knowledge of the specialist, together with the special methods or techniques required for pursuing such knowledge
    - (2) On the other hand, *paideia* (which in Latin becomes *humanitas*, and, in English “learning”)—
 

this Aristotle regarded as the learning of the generalist, the learning appropriate to an educated man, one who has acquaintance with all branches of knowledge, but an acquaintance that does not make him an expert, a specialist, or a professor of any one of them.

- c. As my paraphrase of Aristotle's text indicates, he is presenting us with the distinction between the kind of learning that is everybody's business and the kind of knowledge that is not.
2. This basic distinction is preserved in, the centuries that follow
- a. In Roman culture, by such orators or rhetoricians as Cicero and Quintilian (who, by the way, thought that the ideal orator had also to be a philosopher)
  - b. In the high middle ages, by the distinction between the kind of learning that made a man a master of the arts and the kind of professional competence that made him a doctor of medicine, law, or theology.

Please note, in passing, that there were no doctors of philosophy. The masters of the arts were all philosophers, all generalists.

The Ph.D. degree was first created in the German universities to signify professional competence in a specialized branch of knowledge (*episteme* or *scientia*, not *paedeia* or *humanitas*). It misuses the word "philosophy," which should be associated with the humanistic learning of the generalist, not the scientific knowledge or professional scholarship of the specialist.

The degree should have been Sc. D. doctor of science or scholarship. So named., it would have clearly indicated that the bearers of this degree, most of whom become university professors, are men of specialized knowledge, not generalists, not humanists, least of all philosophers.

- c. After the middle ages and at the beginning of modern times, the so-called "renaissance of learning" is a return to the Roman version of Aristotle's distinction.
  - (1) It placed emphasis on literature and the languages—on humane letters—rather than on the sciences.
  - (2) It failed to see, as the Romans failed to see, that, according to Aristotle's way of making the distinction., the sciences and even mathematics, approached in a certain way could be included, to the

learning of the generalist—in humanistic or philosophical learning.

3. What I am saying, in other words, is that with the Romans and the Renaissance, the humanities, or humanistic learning, became too restricted, with its major or almost exclusive emphasis on humane letters—language, literature, and rhetoric—and with too sharp a distinction between humane letters, on the one hand, and the special sciences, on the other.
  4. Beginning in the 17th century, we have the modern development of the experimental and investigative sciences, but it was not until the end of the 18th century and the middle or end of the 19th century that all these specialized disciplines broke away from the parent stem of philosophy and became independent or autonomous branches, of specialized knowledge.
- D. The first modern statements of the opposition or conflict between the sciences (the knowledge of the specialist) and the humanities (the humanistic or philosophical learning of the generalist) are to be found in the writings of three 19th century educators—
- one, himself a scientist and philosopher of science, Whewell, Master of Trinity College, Cambridge
  - another, himself a philosopher, John Stuart Mill, in his Inaugural Address as Rector of St. Andrews University
  - and the third, himself a theologian, John Henry Cardinal Newman, in his *Idea of a University*.
1. I will confine myself to Mill’s distinction between the kind of learning that should be the property of all educated human beings and the kind, that should be reserved for particular professions or occupations. Here I cannot refrain from quoting two passages from Mill that slim up his basic insight.
    - a. In the first, Mill, using the word “university” where we would use the phrase “undergraduate college,” declares, without qualification, that the ‘university should not be concerned with professional education. He says:
 

It is not a place of professional education. Universities are not intended to teach the knowledge

required to fit men for some special mode of gaining their livelihood. Their object is not to make skilful lawyers, or physicians, or engineers, but capable and cultivated human beings. It is very right that there should be public facilities for the study of professions. It is well that there should be Schools of Law, and of Medicine, and it would be well if there were schools of engineering, and the industrial arts.

- b. Rephrasing his point in our vernacular, Mill is here saying that specialized or professional knowledge of all sorts—scientific knowledge and specialized scholarship—belong in what we would call the graduate school, which is built on the nineteenth-century model of the German university, not in the undergraduate college which should be devoted only to initiating the young into the humanistic or philosophical learning of the generalist.
- c. The second quotation from his Address gives his reason for saying this:

Men are men before they are lawyers, or physicians, or merchants, or manufacturers; and if you make them capable and sensible men, they will make themselves capable and sensible lawyers or physicians. What professional men should carry away with them from an University, is not professional knowledge but that which should direct the use of their professional knowledge, and bring the light of general culture to illuminate the technicalities of a special pursuit. Men may be competent lawyers without general education, but it depends on general education to make them philosophic lawyers—who demand, and are capable of apprehending, principles, instead of merely cramming their memory with details. And so of all other useful pursuits, mechanical included. Education makes a man a more intelligent shoemaker, if that be his occupation, but not by teaching him how to make shoes; it does so by the mental exercise it gives, and the habits it impresses.

- E. Turning now to the 20th century, let me call your attention to and comment briefly on four things.

1. The protracted controversy that followed C. P. Snow's essay on the two cultures is one source of our present confusion about the relation of the humanities to the sciences.
  - a. The two cultures referred to in Snow's essay and in the many responses it evoked are not two cultures at all, but separate fragments of one and the same culture—the culture of the specialist.
    - (1) Snow's main point turned on the failure of communication between the literary man and the scientist, the failure of each to understand the language or the contribution of the other,
    - (2) The explanation of that failure lies in the extraordinary degree to which specialization has advanced in all academic disciplines not just in the natural and social sciences, but in, historical research, in literary scholarship, in philology and Philosophy as
    - (3) The real point that Snow should have made is not that we are now confronted with two cultures that cannot communicate with one another, but rather that we are confronted with a vast multiplicity of specialized disciplines (some of them classified as sciences, some as non-scientific scholarship), none of which can communicate with any other.
 

(The annual meetings of A. A. A. S. bear witness to this. Even the mathematicians meet in fifteen or twenty different sections, divided by the intense degree of specialization that now exists in mathematics. Communication and understanding has now been narrowed down to the minute sectional subdivisions of each specialized academic discipline. What is true of mathematics is equally true of historical research, of philosophy, of psychology, and so on.)
  - b. In other words, what we are confronted with, as a result of the progressively ever more intense specialization of knowledge to all academic fields, is not two cultures, but no culture at all—

if by a culture is understood the common learning in which all human beings should be able to participate and in terms of which they should be able to communicate and understand one another.

2. As further evidence of this deplorable state of affairs, let me mention briefly my own experience in the work of producing the new *Britannica*, the 15th edition, which appeared in 1974.
  - a. At the initiation of this work 10 years earlier, I proposed that the 15th edition should differ from all earlier editions, especially from the famous 11th, in making all its articles intelligible to the intelligent layman.
    - (1) Nothing less than that deserves the name “encyclopedia”—the circle of general learning, of *paideia* in Aristotle’s sense of that term.
    - (2) In both the 11th and the subsequent 14th edition, the articles were written by specialists as if they were intended to be read by other specialists in the same field. The encyclopaedia had become an anthology of specialized knowledge, rather than a compendium of generalized learning.
    - (3) How far did we succeed in achieving our objective? I wish I could say one hundred percent, but we fell a little short of that. It is remarkable that we did succeed 80 or 85 percent of the way. That is a remarkable improvement on earlier editions of Britannica.
  - b. We should have been able to succeed one hundred percent if we could have solicited articles from men of general learning that includes an acquaintance with and understanding of mathematics and the sciences as well as history, literature, philosophy, religion, and the arts.
    - (1) One measure of the degree to which we can no longer call upon such general learning is the amount of editing we had to do to make the scholarly contributions as readable as they should be.
    - (2) Another indication of the same is the number of instances in which scholars refused to



comply with our request for generally intelligible writing, or refused to accept editorial revisions we felt compelled to make in order to remove technical and specialized jargon and to render their articles more intelligible and appropriate for a general encyclopaedia.



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