



CULTURES IN CONFLICT

An Essay in the Philosophy of the Humanities

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For the making of this book I am indebted to more people than I can begin to thank. In the course of it, many books and articles are referred to, cited, and quoted, and I have tried to be as fair and conscientious as possible in acknowledging my indebtedness to them in the notes and bibliography. But this mode is insufficient to indicate the extent of it and, in some cases, misses it entirely. Perhaps the simplest remedy for this defect is to provide a brief narrative of the major stages in the development of the book.

Its origin dates from the fall of 1936, when I began graduate work in philosophy at the University of Chicago. At that time the newly established Committee on the Liberal Arts had just come into being under the leadership of Mortimer Adler, Scott Buchanan, and Richard McKeon. As a student of all three professors and the

friend of many of the younger members of the committee, I was at once in the midst of discussions about the theory and history of the liberal arts. This interest continued and further developed when I went on to the Institute of Mediaeval Studies at the University of Toronto to complete my doctorate. It gained added impetus from the lectures that Etienne Gilson gave there during 1939-40 on the continuity of classical culture from Cicero to Erasmus. Although I had by then departed from Toronto, through the generosity that was characteristic of Gilson toward his students, I was able to obtain a copy of his lecture notes. The war interrupted my plans to work on a history of the liberal arts in the Middle Ages, and this project resulted only in a few papers on mediaeval logic many years later.

The next turn came in 1950 with the establishment at the University of Notre Dame of the General Program of Liberal Studies, a program of integrated studies based largely on the great books and of which I was the first director. With its students and faculty, I had the privilege of devoting many years of learning and teaching to the liberal arts and humanities. Without these years this book would have been immensely poorer than it is. However, it began to assume the first lines of its present shape during the late 1960s, when, on leave from the university, I served as a member of the planning committee responsible for preparing the new fifteenth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* under the direction of Dr. Mortimer J. Adler. In this capacity I worked especially on the "Organization of Knowledge" that ultimately resulted in the introductory volume now known as the *Propaedia*. On returning to Notre Dame, I was able to offer courses on the theory and history of the humanities, out of which I drew the materials that appear in the article, "Humanities," in the *Encyclopaedia*, as well as a fairly detailed plan for the structure of this book.

For the time and place of its actual writing, I am beholden to the Benedictines of St. John's Abbey in their sylvan retreat in Minnesota, where I was privileged to be a fellow at their Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research for the academic year 1973-74.

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A POLEMICAL PROLOGUE

Ideals of Intellectual Culture

Distinction, separation, conflict—these are among the principal features of the history of learning in the West. The Greeks began the process by distinguishing philosophy from myth, thereby initiating the separation of logos from mythos. Within the domain of logos, they also determined many of its most fundamental divisions. Rhetoric, logic, grammar, literary criticism, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, harmonics, physical and biological science, ethics, politics, metaphysics, and history are among the fields that they marked off. The application of reason to the matter of religion, especially by the Christian thinkers of the mediaeval West, eventually resulted in the distinction of philosophy from a theology based on faith in a divine revelation. The modern world has brought about the separation of the sciences from philosophy with the establishment, first, of the autonomy of the natural sciences and then, only within the last century or so, of the social sciences. In our own day the separating off of new sciences has continued at an even faster rate until the resulting fragmentation sometimes seems more of a curse than a blessing.

With distinction and separation, there also arises the possibility of difference, disagreement, opposition, and conflict. Once there are various and distinct kinds and ways of knowing and expressing, there is occasion for rivalry and competition, for priority and primacy. Is one way of knowing better and more important than another? If so, is it such as to set a standard or norm of excellence and perfection by which all other works of mind are to be measured and judged?

The history of learning shows that all these possibilities have been realized in fact. Differences have led to opposition and conflict. Questions of priority and importance have been answered by the formulation of ideals of intellectual culture that proclaim one form of knowledge to be the best and the criterion for all others. Three such ideals have attained especial prominence and enjoyed supremacy to such an extent that they can be said to have provided paradigms of intellectual culture. Each of them has tended to set the intellectual tone of an entire age and has reverberated throughout that age's length and breadth. Thus the ancient classical world had as its paradigm the literary humanistic ideal of which Cicero

and Quintilian were eminent spokesmen. The Middle Ages followed a theological ideal of knowledge, of which Augustine and Thomas Aquinas are among the greatest representatives. The modern world has seen the rise to supremacy of the scientific ideal, of which Francis Bacon was the first great publicist and Comte and the positivists perhaps its most vigorous proponents.

There are still other ideals of the best knowledge, of “the knowledge most worth having.” But a strong case can be made for the claim that none of them has ever attained the position, power, and general acceptance that each of these three enjoyed in its heyday. Philosophy may appear to be the most glaring omission. There is certainly no doubt that philosophers from the time of Plato and Aristotle down to the present have proclaimed the superiority of their discipline over any of its rivals. But while this much cannot be denied, it can still be argued that philosophy has never succeeded to the same extent as the three ideals just named in providing the dominant cultural form of an age. For the most part, philosophers have made good their claim only among their fellow philosophers and have failed to persuade the general literate public. Nevertheless, it must also be noted that, although philosophy may not succeed in its own cause, its presence and support are always needed for the establishment of the other ideals as paradigms. To claim paradigmatic value for any form of knowledge is, ipso facto, to put forward a philosophical assertion, i.e., one that ultimately has to seek its justification in philosophy.

A cultural paradigm makes manifest its presence by many different signs. One kind or way of knowledge, often accompanied by one particular form of expression, comes to enjoy a highly privileged and preferred position in comparison with other forms. The practitioners and representatives of the dominant form tend to receive greater honor than others in the world of learning. It attracts the “best brains,” receives the most attention, and has the greatest “production.” Thus, for example, the so-called knowledge explosion that has occurred since the end of World War II has taken place largely in the sciences and the disciplines that imitate them, whereas the comparable “explosion” that occurred in the thirteenth century was a feature of the theological ideal in its scholastic form.

The dominance of one cultural form shows up also in the control that it exercises over the educational curriculum in its texts and methods as well as in the goals at which it aims. Thus, in antiquity, the form of education that attracted the most resources was the literary culture of the orator-lawyer; in the Middle Ages, it was the

theological training of the religious; and in the modern world, it is the research training of the scientist.

Sometimes, but not always, the universities are the centers of the paradigmatic intellectual activity. They are now, as they were in the scholastic Middle Ages. Yet it was not so in antiquity, nor in the early modern period, from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, when, almost without exception, high achievement in both the sciences and the humanities took place outside of the universities: witness such figures as Erasmus, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Descartes, Leibniz, Locke, Newton, Goethe, Wordsworth, Faraday, Darwin, and Mill, none of whom did their main work within the structure provided by the university.

Each of the three paradigmatic ideals originally won its position of supremacy only as the result of overcoming and replacing another claimant to the title of primacy. The theological ideal at first converted to its own purposes the classical literary ideal and then later replaced it with the scholastic form of theology. The scientific ideal at first opposed and then conquered both the literary and the theological ideals. Usually, forms of intellectual culture become paradigm only as a result of conflict, and the conflict has been most intense during those periods when one ideal is challenging another. Such was the case in the time of the early Fathers of the Church, especially when St. Augustine was writing such books as *The City of God* and *On Christian Doctrine*. An analogous situation occurred with the rise of the new science and was expressed, for example, in the opposition of Descartes and Bacon to both the literary culture of the humanists and the scholastic culture of the theologians. The fact that in recent years there have been outbreaks of controversy between the sciences and the humanities, in which even religion and theology are once more participants, may be an indication that we are again at a time of significant cultural change. Certainly, the scientific ideals and its technological achievements no longer enjoy the unquestioned approval, if not adulation, that they had only a few years ago. Science and its remaking of the world have come to be recognized as not entirely unmixed blessings; appeals and demands are put forth in favor of a “counter-culture” that is directed mainly against a culture based on science; and for the first time in many generations, there is again widespread interest in religion. If such manifestations should prove to be more than passing fads, there will be no doubt that we have been undergoing a cultural crisis, a crisis in which one of the great and central issues is a conflict of ideals of intellectual culture.

Such a conflict becomes most intense—one is tempted to say, most vicious—when one form of knowledge lays claim to the exclusive title to all knowledge and thereby denies the value of any other form. Such intellectual imperialism has occurred under all three cultural paradigms, but today it is met most frequently in works expounding the positivist ideal of science. With the appearance of intellectual imperialism, we come to the reason for the polemical character of this prologue and, indeed, of the book. If there is any single contention of the book as a whole, it is that this imperialism is not only harmful to the intellectual life, but also unnecessary and wasteful. Differences there are among the various ways and kinds of knowing and expression, differences that are real and important, as I shall endeavor to show. Differences may give rise to a certain tension. But differences need not as such entail opposition and conflict, and certainly do not imply imperialist aggression aiming at total destruction.

Intellectual imperialism is not the only evil at large in the world of learning. Another one, although admittedly a much less harmful variety, consists in claiming for one kind of knowledge a place of centrality and supremacy, thereby relegating other kinds to a secondary position of less importance and maintaining this as a matter of right, not just of fact. The existence of paradigm ideals of knowledge, as considered above, are matters of historical and sociological fact. But it is an entirely different matter, and one with more serious consequences for the health and welfare of our intellectual life, to claim that one of the ideals—whether the literary-humanistic, the theological, or the scientific—is by right and principle the supreme and best form of intellectual activity and the criterion by which all others are to be judged.

Although the three ideals achieved their positions as paradigms in different historical periods, it seems to be a fact that once a cultural ideal achieves such a position, it never ceases to possess the power to attract and influence the mind of man, even though it may have lost its historic position in the society at large. Thus, although neither the literary nor the theological ideal is paradigm in today's scientific world, each of them continues to have followers who maintain the most exalted claims for their intellectual ideal. It thus appears at least a likely hypothesis that each of the three ideals answers to a deeply felt cultural need of man and to aspirations that are native to the human spirit. Each thereby responds to a permanent need, even though the fact that one enjoys a position of supremacy in a given society is relative to a definite time and place in history.

Cultural Conflicts and Issues

Conflict among these cultural ideals has been recurrent, if not continuous, in the intellectual history of the West. How very rich and manifold that history has been becomes evident merely from a listing of the more famous cases that have occurred since “L’affaire Socrate,” which has been called the first recorded example of a “counter-culture.”

In our time we are most familiar with the conflict between the sciences and the humanities, particularly in the form that it took in the Snow-Leavis controversy over the *two cultures*, in which the claims of the scientific and literary ideals met one another. The nineteenth century witnessed not only the same conflict, but also the confrontation of science and religion, as well as that of the *Naturwissenschaften* and the *Geisteswissenschaften*. Still earlier, the French Encyclopedists had called for junking all the old in favor of science and technology, Vico opposed his “new science” to the new sciences of Galileo and Descartes, and the quarrel of ancients and moderns culminated in a battle of the books. The Renaissance and Reformation saw an even more complex and confusing struggle, in which humanists and Scholastics, Protestants and Catholics, old learning and new learning of many sorts met and opposed one another on various fronts. The earlier triumph of scholastic theology did not go uncontested even in its heyday: scriptural exegetes opposed the scientific theologians, and grammar and logic each led their forces in a battle of the seven arts. Even the Dark Ages had its conflict of dialecticians and antidialecticians, while the age of the Fathers of the Church found the cause of Christian culture turned against the classical pagan learning. Although this culture may have appeared as all one to the Fathers, it was not without its own divisions, of which the deepest was that between poetry and eloquence on one side and philosophy and science on the other.

The list of conflicts, restricted as it is to the better-known instances only, is a long one. To consider each of them in any detail would require a long book indeed. It would also be a repetitious one, at least in the sense that many of the same questions and issues would keep reappearing under only slightly different forms. The conflict of cultural ideals has been a recurrent one, and there are certain constants that keep appearing in the issues that are the cause of controversy. Hence, by turning our attention to these issues it is possible to delimit and narrow the field of investigation.

For this purpose I shall consider four prominent historical forms that the conflict has taken. Although historical exposition is not the principal aim, as will soon become clear, I shall follow a chronological order and begin consideration of the issues in the conflict with “the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry” that Plato reported in the tenth book of *The Republic*. For the mediaeval form of the conflict of cultural ideals, I shall consider the battle of the seven arts, primarily as described in the thirteenth-century poem of that title by the French trouvère, Henri d’Andeli. I shall then turn to the quarrel of ancients and moderns, especially in the form in which it emerged toward the end of the eighteenth century as a battle of the books, as Swift called it. I shall conclude consideration of the issues in the conflict with an analysis of the Snow-Leavis controversy concerning the sciences and the humanities.


Although in each case I shall begin with an actual historical instance of a conflict of cultural ideals, the focus of interest will be the issue itself and not the historical controversy about it. Thus, after locating and identifying a prominent historical form of the conflict, I shall show that the issues involved have been recurrent ones in our intellectual history and are, in fact, still with us and deserve analysis and understanding on their own. The history, in short, will at most provide an occasion for locating an issue that will then become the object of theoretical and philosophical consideration. The philosophical, as distinguished from the historical, intent of the work becomes still more pronounced once the ulterior purpose of this consideration is taken into account. The paradigm ideals of intellectual culture and the conflicts and issues with which they have been involved and concerned are not only of considerable interest and importance in themselves. They also provide the means, and I would argue the very best and indeed indispensable means, for developing a theory of the humanities that will establish them as a unified field of study, distinct from that of the sciences, of great value in itself, and an essential and integral part of the world of learning. My concern then with these intellectual conflicts is not only or mainly for the purpose of exposing the differences that have been their cause in the hope of moderating, if not of eliminating such conflicts, however important and worth attempting this may be in itself. Rather, it also has the further and higher aim of developing a philosophy of the humanities.

Plan of the Work

There are three principal tasks lying before us, corresponding to the three parts of this book. The first task is the exposition from

representative figures of the three great historical paradigms of intellectual culture to see the account that each has to give of itself and to locate at least some of the sources of the strength and power of each.

The second task is to provide an account and analysis of some of the more important and typical conflicts in which the differing intellectual ideals have become engaged. In each case, I shall begin with an instance of actual historical conflict, but, once this factual basis has been established, the principal concern will be to identify and analyze the major issues underlying the conflicts and to consider possibilities of their resolution.

The third task is to bring together the results that have been obtained in order to formulate a theory of the humanities that will show where they stand within the world of learning as well as the reason for believing that that world can constitute one world in which the sciences and the humanities form an intellectual community devoted to peaceful and fruitful cooperation. 

From his book of the same title.

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