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Toward a Theory of the Humanities

BY FRANCIS M. MYERS

OUT OF A MULTITUDE of statements about the humanities, the idea that they are separate from the sciences, if not opposed to them, is one of the few that is expressed with seeming clarity. This idea is really far from clear, but it is only when we try to learn what it is that is thus distinct from the sciences that we begin to realize how much confusion we have bogged into.

There is confusion about what characterizes the humanities, both in content and as a discipline. There is vagueness and uncertainty about the nature of the contribution, if any, that the humanities do make, or can make, either to the academic community or to the wider world of human affairs. It is even hard to find a clear explanation of why there is so much confusion.

The humanities have been known as humane studies, presumably to distinguish them, on the one hand, from divine studies and, on the other, from the "natural" sciences. But this approach is negative and unclear, especially since many intellectual disciplines today are regarded as being neither "divine" nor "natural" nor "humane." People indicated the main traditional role of the humanities more clearly and positively when they referred to them as "polite learning." From the time of the *humanitas* of Cicero to our own day, the humanities have been the arts of gentility, the disciplines basic to the training of gentlemen. For gentlemen should be prominent in government, entertaining in the display of learning, and skilled in lovemaking. Gentility in all of these is marked by graceful speaking and writing. But as the traditional social hierarchies have disintegrated, as even status, to modify Sir Henry Maine's famous phrase, becomes established by contract, so has the traditional role of the humanities become vague and dubious.

As polite learning declined in importance and in clarity of role, what I may here call unpolished, or even uncouth, learning increased

in value. Science and the applied arts have grown in prestige at the same time that they have helped dissolve the substance of traditional status, and they have done so, in both cases, because they have produced demonstrable knowledge and "practical" results. (For better or worse, those persons who have reported such knowledge and results have increasingly come to do so in prose that was indifferent, or bad, without losing preferment.) The "new learning" was also humane in expanding the scope of human experience, both in content and in regard to the numbers who were affected by it.

As if such developments as these were not enough to blur the nature of the humanities in their traditional role, they also become snarled in the conflict between religion and science. At first, in the Renaissance, humanists worked as an independent secular force. But many humanists, though secular, were disturbed by the impact of the new sciences, and especially by the mechanistic ideas associated with them and by their technical applications. As those humanists and others wrestled with the changing ideas, they helped to extend the conflict of religion with science into the secular dichotomies of morality and science, value and fact, emotion and reason, and subjectivity and objectivity. Humanists tended in time to identify themselves with the first term in each of the dichotomies, so that in our own day we are inclined to take for granted that the humanities and the sciences are, if not opposed, at least segregated from each other.

In short, the traditional view of the humanities as polite learning has disintegrated, at the same time that the sciences have, in one sense or another, come to claim humane value; but this problem, which is troublesome enough, has got mixed up with the conflict of science and religion, along with historically related dichotomies, to such a point that it is now hard even to identify the humanities.

I

I am really not sure how many people in or out of our colleges and universities care what the humanities are, or what they do, or what may become of them. But there are people, occasionally, who try to locate the humanities here or there, and all of this must have some bearing on those college curricula that continue to list some programs as humanities. One of the ironies is that there are still writers who try to identify the humanities, which had a long secular history, in a loosely ecclesiastical fashion, as the study of the Christian tradition, or the Judeo-Christian tradition, or the Greco-Judeo-Christian tradi-

tion. A more secular and cosmopolitan variation on this effort has been to identify the humanities with the study of values, as though values and the study of them could somehow be separated from other aspects of human experience. Although this sort of approach is not very promising to begin with, many people have, heroically, tried to carry it still further by trying to locate values in subjective experience, which they usually interpret in terms of emotion. In its classical interpretations, subjectivity is a "mental" domain which, by definition, is inaccessible to public inquiry. Thus the idea that subjectivity is manifested in art and literature implies the impossibility of the classical notion of subjectivity, or that notion implies the impossibility of the manifestations. In general, then, the effort to define the humanities in terms of some traditionally philosophic subject matter has not been fruitful.

Efforts to define the humanities with reference to traditional academic divisions have encountered other difficulties. The practical instruction of languages is increasingly transformed by techniques of learning that have little to do with the older teaching of grammar and literature, while linguistic theory is coming to draw heavily upon the social sciences and mathematics. Philosophy in the United States, under the influence of the doctrines of linguistic analysis, would seem to be returning to the earlier humanistic concern for grammar and syntax, and yet, if it is becoming more academically genteel, it also seems to be less humane. The rapid development of mathematical logic has to some extent liberated logic, though in untraditionally humanistic directions, while in other respects it threatens to substitute for the Socratic ideal of the philosopher as a midwife to intellectual creativity, the role of the logician as midwife to a computer. History continues to be torn, in large measure, between the shopworn stereotypes of "art" and "science," with much of its workaday instruction dominated by the idea of sciences as the heaping-up of facts. As for the arts, broadly interpreted, they are commonly taught in our schools as forms of vocational instruction, not differing in principle from other "applied arts."

Everything I have said is oversimplification. Yet it is close enough to what has happened to the humanities to illustrate their present state of confusion. And the confusion is nowhere better shown than by the ways in which, in our colleges and universities, we define the humanities by exclusion and administrative accident. After the physical, biological and social sciences, and other still newer academic dis-

ciplines, have staked out their territories, we erect the sign reading Humanities over whatever is left.

II

My own aim in this essay is modest: I hope to make some sense out of some of our current academic divisions of labor, and to do so with reference to human experience, more or less independently of our institutional divisions and subdivisions of it. If my incipient theory is substantially correct, and if it were to be accepted, it could be used to modify, say, our curricular structures. But this is unlikely to happen, no matter how good the theory may be, and it may not be necessary. Institutional structures are always, and properly, responsive to local problems and pressures. Yet a reasonably clear and adequate theory may help us better to understand what is going on, even with many variations.

I hope to define the humanities in a way that does no unnecessary violence either to older usages or to current academic practices. I should like to include those usages and practices, so far as possible, within a simpler, clearer and more comprehensive framework of interpretation than the ones that we presently have before us.

The humanities, then, are the historical and philosophical, or critical, study of the pervasive and continuing meanings in human experience. History, in this sense, is primarily the search for temporal perspective on human endeavor and it is involved in some degree in most of the things that we do. A physician gets a patient's history as one of the first steps toward a medical diagnosis. A parent who tells a family story over and over again to a child is helping him to get his own sense of continuity in the process of living. Similarly, each person makes some criticism or evaluation of events, reports, and ideas. The patient appraises the work of his physician, and the child comes to judge the veracity of the family stories. Insofar as these evaluations are limited in scope, they are what I am calling criticism, and insofar as a person goes beyond appraising this or that and makes a more general interpretation and evaluation of his world, his fellow men, and himself, he is philosophizing.

Each of us is in some fashion and to some degree interpreting, evaluating, and looking for perspective on himself and on the world in which he finds himself; and he is working with meanings in the process. These meanings are embodied in verbal and nonverbal sym-

bols and they set the form, tone, and direction of human experience in a given time and place.

The humanist finds the meanings that are his materials for investigation in both the arts (broadly understood to include literature) and the sciences. He can do so because the arts and the sciences, different as they may be, are much more alike than is generally recognized. Both artists and scientists use objective physical materials—materials that are publicly accessible and examinable: wood, stone, metal, colors, lines and marks. Out of these materials they shape and join public symbols into the communication of meanings, thus providing the objective intellectual materials of the arts, the sciences, and the humanities. The meanings conveyed by any group of these symbols originate in part in imaginative privacy; but they also originate in the wider context of those objectively functioning meanings of human experience that make the private imagination possible. Once born, or reborn, the symbols work objectively to shape and direct the course of further experience.

In addition to the creation and communication of meanings, artists and scientists are also engaged in evaluating the relevance, importance, and validity of their diverse materials and tools and their uses. They proceed rationally in that they employ disciplined competence, critical choice of alternatives, and intelligent testing of methods and results. Both are rational, also, insofar as they serve to enlarge the scope of experience and to increase the precision and competence with which we understand experience and work with it.

The arts and sciences, it is true, are many things and they differ in many ways. Yet they are alike in being rational ways of working with objective materials in creating, communicating, and testing meanings. They spring from common human experience and involve methods that have significantly common characteristics, however much they differ in detail.

Rather than being mutually exclusive domains of life, the arts and the sciences represent a division of labor developed to interpret experience for divergent purposes. They differ in that the significance of what the artist does is general and personal—that is to say, his product pertains to many people but to each in the vivid immediacy of his experience; whereas the product of the scientist's inquiry is general and comparatively impersonal—it abstracts from the immediate richness of experience. The artist seeks to probe, intensify, illuminate,

and celebrate the experiences of individual men and women; the scientist—in the restricted sense—seeks to abstract from that concrete immediacy in order to gain maximum generality of ideas and maximum control of events regardless of the individual characteristics of the persons engaged in the process.

But it is worth repeating that the obvious fact that the arts and the sciences differ does not mean that they are, or should be, segregated. A scientist is a poor one indeed if he does not find his own inquiries enhanced by esthetic sensitivity and creativity, and if he does not find them to be intimately meaningful. The better a scientist is the more he is likely to find that his work is immediately and meaningfully rewarding, and that its meanings extend throughout the areas of living. On the other hand, the method for testing ideas that is precisely developed in the sciences is also, with appropriate modifications, basic to the artistic process. The established sciences are usually identified by subject matter, as physical, biological, and social sciences. Sometimes they are defined in terms of quantitative measurement. But in their most general function, and without restriction to established forms, the sciences are distinguished by the rigorous application of the method of criticizing alternative ideas and of testing them by the best available public data. This is the way we get whatever public knowledge we have.

III

I have been arguing, in short, that the arts and the sciences are different but related aspects of any meaningful and creative endeavor. Each is present in the other, and the distinctive role of the humanities grows out of both. The arts are the interpretive re-creation and communication of significant human experience. The sciences are the rigorous application of our best tests of truth. And the humanities are the historical and philosophical study of the meanings, especially as they arise from the arts and the sciences, that give form and direction to human experience. But what of it? Even if I have succeeded in formulating a theory of the humanities that is simpler and more coherent than others, why should anyone pay it more attention than, perhaps, an appreciative nod?

I would suggest two applications of this theory. One has to do with formal education, especially at the higher levels. For the humanities are the intellectually central discipline in the educational process; and their place follows from their function, not from their name, tra-

dition, status, or administrative arrangement. It makes no great difference where humanists are located administratively or how they are officially classified. What is important is that all participants in formal education recognize the need for historical and philosophical understanding of the meanings inherent in any particular area of learning.

It is perhaps because literary studies have fused perspective and critical judgment so elegantly that they have had special acceptance as humanities. The history and criticism of music, and of the visual arts are more recent but no less humanistic. And the same principle, abstractly simple as it may be, carries over to the history and philosophy of religion, of law, of physics, or of any other division of the curriculum. Oftentimes it is archaeologists, anthropologists, sociologists, botanists, physiologists, linguists, nonacademic journalists or errant amateurs who teach us the importance of such studies. But the principle remains the same. And what applies to any particular study applies also to the educational process as a whole—namely, that it is the job of the humanistic disciplines, whether or not the officially designated humanists carry it out, to evaluate and to gain perspective on the relations among the several disciplines and with regard to the whole on-going enterprise.

There is another application which is less academic. Humanists could address themselves more than they do to some of our more urgent problems. I have no desire to deprecate the large number of valuable studies that humanists are carrying out with regard to subjects both ancient and modern, or to confuse humanistic studies with social action. I want only to suggest that more humanists than do so at present could focus their historical and critical capacities on meanings that are decisive for living men and women.

Although I have remarked that it does not make a great deal of difference who performs the work of the humanities as long as the job is done, professional humanists should not be complacent to let so much of their work be done by others. Take, for example, one of the most pressing of contemporary problems—the modern city. The main humanistic studies of the city by a North American have been the work of Lewis Mumford, who is not an academician. City planners struggle against assorted interests to introduce some intelligibility into the expansion of our cities. Occasional architects work against overwhelming odds to see a house as more than an isolated unit. Sociologists continue to study urban developments in ways that sometimes illuminate our patterns of living and meaning. Profes-

sional humanists seem disproportionately to save themselves for purer pursuits.

Yet in the effort to cope with such concrete problems we may see how gratuitous are the abstract problems posed by the shopworn dichotomies—fact and value, reason and emotion, objectivity and subjectivity, and the like—that I mentioned earlier. Intellectual wholeness is most evident in collaborative effort where special skills function as divisions of labor without regard for academic compartments. We can then see more clearly, perhaps, that distinctions between objectivity and subjectivity, for example, do not refer to separate entities but to something closer to the distinction between the right hand and the left hand. In a relevant concern for concrete problems, besides, a humanist—without diminishing his position in the republic of letters or the community of scholars—can distinguish himself as a member of the human community.

IV

But in these last remarks I am trying to open neglected possibilities rather than to issue a call to mount the pulpit or the barricades. Although humanists may gain stimulus and material from concrete problems, their basic concern for comprehensive perspective and judgment requires an attention that is at once more intimate and more distant than academic performance or social action. Robert Penn Warren makes a valuable statement about the humanities, without naming them, in *All the King's Men*. The narrator of the story is named, significantly, Jack Burden. Also significantly, he is both a historian and a newspaper reporter. Near the end of the novel he relates a conversation with the woman who is later to be his wife. "I tried to tell her," he says, "how if you could not accept the past and its burden there was no future, for without the one there cannot be the other, and how if you could accept the past you might hope for the future, for only out of the past can you make the future."

I would add to this that our views of the past and our ideas about the future are important because they help to illuminate the present. They help us to see that we are dependent on our predecessors in the human quest for what we are and for what we can attain, and to see at the same time that we ourselves are responsible, though not wholly responsible, for the outcome of that quest. A clearer view of our spatial and temporal setting, of the dreams, failures, and achievements of others, may help us to see ourselves more clearly and honestly, to

see the good, the commonplace, and the bad for what they are, and to accept our honest failures without guilt and our accomplishments without false pride.

Most humanists, like most of the rest of us, are content to reaffirm those meanings which already pervade the community. But there are humanists who, in the company of equally creative artists and scientists, explore the frontiers of human experience and push beyond the established modes of experience to open up new ways of thinking and perceiving. Humanists who work toward fresh insight and comprehension help us to understand our dependence on the traditions of mankind and our responsibility to evaluate and modify those traditions so that they become more adequate than they now are to the tasks of living. With the aid of such humanists we can also become more alert to the areas of experience that we bypass when we stick to established paths, more sensitive to those qualities of experience that tend to slip away from us, more creatively responsive to the unexpected, and more understanding of all of these in their continuity.

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