

# Syracuse Scholar (1979-1991)

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Volume 2  
Issue 1 *Syracuse Scholar Spring 1981*

Article 13

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1981

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### Recommended Citation

Smith, Huston (1981) "Four Cultures: The Ontological Turn," *Syracuse Scholar (1979-1991)*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 13.

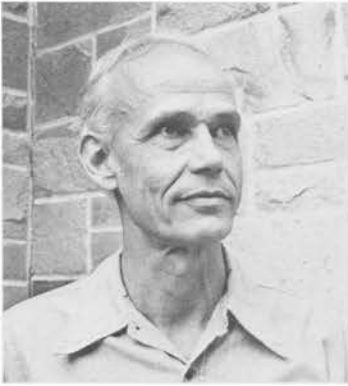
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# Four Cultures:

## *The Ontological Turn*

### *Huston Smith*



Professor Smith's comments were delivered at Syracuse University on October 26, 1979, as part of the symposium "The Study of Culture." His talk has been slightly modified for purposes of publication.

Huston Smith was Professor of Philosophy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for fifteen years before coming to Syracuse University as Thomas J. Watson Professor of Religion and Adjunct Professor of Philosophy. He is author of *The Purposes of Higher Education*, *The Religions of Man*, *Condemned to Meaning*, and *Forgotten Truth: The Primordial Tradition*, as well as various articles for professional journals.

1. Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936), p. 59.
2. Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth: The Primordial Tradition* (New York: Harper, 1976).

Like a day, or a poem, this paper discovered itself. My early years devoted to teaching humanities at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, at just the time that C.P. Snow's *Two Cultures* and the scientific revolution were sweeping the nation, instilled in me an abiding interest in the way the humanities are related to science. But this interest appeared against the backdrop of a second dichotomy—the Hebraic and Hellenic components of Western civilization, whose tributaries also course through me. So I thought I would use this occasion to assess these two pairs of cultures, trying once again to determine where the slash in each pair—science/humanities, Jerusalem/Athens—should be drawn. Having a metaphysical disposition I felt sure that the touchstone would be ontology, that branch of metaphysics dealing with the ultimate nature of reality: the four cultures would no doubt be occupied with different things—different kinds of objects or entities. Not until I was nearing the end of my paper did I see that what I had written was in fact an essay on the Great Chain of Being. Each of the four cultures I had dealt with was concerned with one of its four classic links.

Arthur Lovejoy tells us that this chain represents the universe as composed of "links ranging in hierarchical order from the meagerest kinds of existents . . . through 'every possible' grade up to the *ens perfectissimum*."<sup>1</sup> The hierarchical order moves upward toward greater importance, worth, power, and being. The scheme is universal (as I have suggested by subtitling my own study of it *The Primordial Tradition*),<sup>2</sup> but for the West it was Plato who first identified the chain's principal links. Reading from the bottom up, they are four: (a) the sensible world, (b) an intermediate world of spirits, (c) the realm of the Platonic forms and the Demiurge, or creator God of the *Timaeus* (for present purposes the latter is the more important), and (d) the Idea of the Good and the ineffable of Plato's Seventh Epistle. What I discovered in the course of writing this essay was that the science/humanities distinction correlates with *a* and *b*, the two lower

rungs of Plato's hierarchy (in his spirit world we need include here only the human spirit), and the Jerusalem/Athens distinction with its two upper realms, *c* and *d*.

## Science and the Humanities

In trying to distinguish the humanities from science we must face today the surprising claim that they are not really different. This view was not around when Snow fired his volley that triggered the two-cultures debate twenty years ago. Today, though, it is getting a considerable press and, by my lights, spreading a lot of confusion. I shall call this view the New Subjectivism because it focuses its attack on the objectivity which we had all assumed concerns the distinction between scientific and humanistic knowledge. According to the new view, the reason the social sciences, say, have been unable to achieve the objectivity of the natural sciences is that even the latter are not objective. If this approach were correct, this paper would be reduced by half; for if there is no difference between the sciences and the humanities, we obviously need not waste our time searching for a nonexistent dividing line. Clearly this new claim demands attention.

Ever since Galileo dropped his cannonballs off Pisa Tower, it has seemed obvious (until recently) that scientific knowledge is more objective than other kinds of knowledge. Thanks to the fact that science connects at some point with our physical senses—everybody could *see* that the large and small cannonballs were falling at the same speed—it commands consensus. Because science reduces the subjective element in knowing to a minimum (that is, reduces the subjective element to sense reports, which are themselves objective in that we usually agree about them), the knowledge that science delivers is essentially objective knowledge.

But according to the New Subjectivists, the supposition that scientific knowledge is objective is a philosophical mistake inherited from Descartes's rationalist interpretation of the implications of Galilean science. Science is not objective because, like all human knowing, it involves interpretation. Even natural scientists must determine what should count as the relevant facts and what their theoretical significance is; so there is no neutral, uninterpreted data for deciding between competing hypotheses.

Already in the last century, Pierre Duhem had noted that in science individual sentences are not tested piecemeal, one by one, against experience; theories as wholes are tested. In our time, Willard Quine has worked out the implications of this view, arguing that in science, no less than in common-sense knowledge, all data is "theory laden." To verify a theory we move in a circle, from hypothesis to data and from data back to hypothesis, without ever encountering bare facts that could upset our global theory. Paul Feyerabend's *Against Method* carries this point to the anarchistic conclusion that there *is* no fundamental difference between the truth of the natural and social sciences or, indeed, between these and astrology or witchcraft. For nowhere can there be objective verification; only the confrontation of incommensurable holistic interpretations. On this view the only difference between the physical sciences and the study of man is that where human

beings are involved, the differences between competing holistic theories—between Freudianism and behaviorism, say—are fully apparent (scandalously apparent, we are tempted to add); whereas scientists somehow manage to repress their foundational differences. It takes a crisis in science or a “psychoanalyst” of science like Thomas Kuhn to bring the differences to light. The British physicist and philosopher Mary Hesse draws out the full implications of this relativistic view as follows:

*Talk of the ‘truth’ of science, and of the ontology of objects which it presupposes, becomes wholly internal to scientific theory itself. Truth and existence-claims are determined, not by the world, but by the postulates of theory: for our physics there are fundamental particles and fields, a space-time continuum, forces, and persisting physical objects; for other cultures there are spirits, witches, telepathic communications, persons not uniquely and continuously space-time locatable, and so on.*<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Hesse deplors this argument of many equally valid worlds, but Richard Rorty is content with it:

*It might be the case that all future human societies will be (as a result, perhaps, of ubiquitous technocratic totalitarianism) humdrum variations on our own. But Newtonian mechanics (which already seems so hopeless for explaining acupuncture, the migration of butterflies, and so on) may soon come to seem as badly off as Aristotle’s hylomorphism. [The important distinction] is not the line between the human and the non-human but between that portion of the field of inquiry where we feel rather uncertain that we have the right vocabulary at hand and that portion where we feel rather certain that we do. This does, at the moment, roughly coincide with the distinction between the fields of the Geistes- and the Naturwissenschaften. But this coincidence may be mere coincidence.*<sup>4</sup>

Note what we have here: something very interesting, for it is nothing short of positivist imperialism in reverse. Whereas the positivists wanted to press all knowing into the objective molds of natural science, this new, reverse imperialism takes what it assumes to be the illusory stability and objectivity of natural science and assimilates it into the instability and subjectivity that the social sciences (and even parts of the humanities) have been trying to rid themselves of. Whereas the positivists looked forward to the day when *all* noetic disciplines would be scientific, the currently fashionable view is that *none* can be scientific if science connotes objectivity. For, to repeat, each discipline is an internally consistent whole that derives from interpretations. There are no neutral, objective facts by which a discipline can be judged.

The response to this startling conclusion has been varied. Natural scientists have wisely ignored it and gone quietly about their business. Social scientists are nervous about it; having waited patiently for the Galileo who will move their studies onto the objective foundations the natural sciences seem to have built on from the start, they find it disconcerting suddenly to be told that objectivity does not exist, that there is no such thing. As for humanists, they seem to be greeting the New Subjectivism with wild embrace. I find this somewhat embarrassing, but one can sense the motive behind it. It enables humanists to

3. Mary Hesse, “In Defence of Objectivity,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 18 (1972): 282.

4. Richard Perry, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 315–52.

say to a science-enamored society, "See! We're as important as the scientists are! Our knowledge is as valid as theirs."

It is obvious from my tone that I consider this New Subjectivity a disaster, a smog on our intellectual landscape. Intuitively one knows it can't be right, for the natural sciences can reach into their bins of knowledge and tell us how to accomplish incredible things—send people to the moon, for example—whereas the disciplines that treat of man cannot do this; I include here the social sciences as well as the humanities.

A conversation I had not long ago with a financier is worth relating here, for it illustrates this point concretely. In the 1960s, I told him, I had gotten the impression that economists were closing in on what makes economics tick, developing computer programs that would enable them to predict what would happen to B, C, and D if one pressed A on the console. I now found my confidence waning. Was this just me, or did my tarnished hopes reflect the state of the "science"? The latter, he said, and picked up with his own story:

"When I go to my office in the morning," he said, "I sit down to a computer that has thirty-seven buttons I can press to tell it what's happening in our economy. But to know what *will* happen, I need something that does not now exist. I need an economic psychologist—someone who can tell me how people will respond to economy-affecting alternatives as they arise."

My mind went back to the 1960s. I wondered if his hypothetical economic psychologist could have predicted the Beatles, the improbable Liverpool four whose phonograph records altered the international balance of payments.

With the Beatles positioned thus against the astronauts as intuitive reminders that in human beings we are dealing with subjects that differ *in kind* from the forces of nature that transport and otherwise affect their bodies, let me now describe the difference between science (which focuses on nature) and the humanities (which focus on persons).

The New Subjectivist's point about the sciences being wholes is in itself true: what will count as relevant facts, and what theoretical significance is to be assigned to these facts, must be determined within the science itself; there is no external vantage point from which to do so. But we come now to the point. In the natural sciences, where the objects dealt with are things rather than persons, the elements from which the wholes are built can be identified. Scientific theories relate these ingredient elements by way of explicit propositions that state laws.

Thus far I have scarcely mentioned the social sciences, that buffer zone between the natural sciences and the humanities; but a word about them is now in order. Because of the practical payoff that has resulted from the natural scientists' way of dealing with their materials, social scientists have tried to accommodate human studies to the same model. They too have sought to devise theories that represent explicit, identifiable facts and their lawful relations. The current form these theories are taking is formal models in which the facts are context-free elements, or attributes, or features, or bits of information; and the model is a computer program or flow chart showing how such elements are combined to produce complex individual or social

behavior. But whether these models be in structuralist anthropology, cognitive psychology, or decision analysis (for example), they have succeeded no better than their predecessors either in enabling their practitioners to predict or in snowballing into a unified theory of human beings that compares in any way to the unified view of nature that undergirds the physical sciences. This *may* be (as we so often hear) because the social sciences are still in their infancy, but the rate of progress in their desired direction is not such as to rule out the alternative: namely, that human beings, more subjects than objects, are simply not creatures that expose much of themselves to scientific scrutiny.

Who are these creatures who, differing *in kind* from physical objects—we come here to the ontology of my subtitle—elude so successfully science's butterfly net? A promising entrée is to ask how they think, thinking being the attribute that most conspicuously distinguishes them from the other things in nature. It is essential to the claims of the New Subjectivism that human thinking in general not differ in principle from scientific thinking; for if it did, objectivity as the differentiating feature of science might reappear. So the Subjectivists produce a model of common sense that depicts it as sloppier than science, less carefully worked over, but otherwise the same; common sense, too, is assumed to be composed of distinguishable elements that are systematically interrelated, in its case by posits and beliefs which are either conscious or unconscious. Whether they are explicitly expressed in sentences or implicitly held as behavioral dispositions, these beliefs can in principle be stated. In Quine's formulation:

*Hypotheses in various fields of inquiry may tend to receive their confirmation from different kinds of investigation, but this should in no way conflict with our seeing them all as hypotheses.*

*We talk of framing hypotheses. Actually we inherit the main ones, growing up as we do in a going culture. The continuity of belief is due to the retention, at each particular time, of most beliefs.<sup>5</sup>*

In this view, practical common sense is merely a crude scientific theory:

*Science is itself a continuation of common sense. The scientist is indistinguishable from the common man in his sense of evidence, except that the scientist is more careful.<sup>6</sup>*

I think we can now say quite categorically that the claim that there is no essential difference between science and common sense, or what alternatively might be called theoretical understanding and practical understanding, is mistaken. I am myself neither a Heideggerian nor a Wittgensteinian, but on this one point—the point that brings these otherwise strange bedfellows together—Heidegger and Wittgenstein have made their case, with Merleau-Ponty as their helper. Practical understanding is holistic in a way that is entirely different from the theoretical understanding of science. For though practical understanding—that is, everyday coping with things and people—*includes* explicit beliefs and hypotheses, such beliefs and hypotheses are meaningful for practical understanding only in specific contexts and against a background of shared practices, which contexts and practices are not themselves explicit or even explicatable. To learn to ride a bicycle does not require that we consciously or even unconsciously acquire a theory

5. W. V. Quine and J.S. Ullian, *The Web of Belief*, 2d ed. (New York: Random House, 1978).

6. W. V. Quine, *The Ways of Paradox and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 233.



of the act; and this holds for our bodily and social competences generally. How far one stands from a conversational partner varies from culture to culture according to whether the partner is male or female, superior or inferior, and whether the conversation involves business, courtship, or friendship; one does not develop cultural competence regarding these factors by formulating beliefs and following rules. Skills of this kind embody a holistic interpretation, a holistic sense, of what it means to be human and what counts as real. Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Merleau-Ponty argue convincingly that this background of practices cannot be made explicit because (a) the practices are largely bodily skills and (b) the background is so pervasive that we cannot make it an object of analysis.<sup>7</sup> Both arguments add up to the claim that the background and practices are not a theory or belief system; indeed, they are not facts or sets of facts at all.

This provides us with my ontological distinction between the sciences and the humanities. Science, in its primary, English-speaking sense of natural science, studies things that can be adequately understood theoretically, through distinguishable elements that are explicitly cognized and systematically related in storable laws. By contrast, the object of humanistic studies (human beings in more than their physiology) cannot be understood in this manner because, for a start—there is more to be said on this point, but not here—their own self-knowledge is rooted in shared practices, bodily orientations, implicit assumptions, and tacit knowledge they themselves can never be fully aware of. Humanists must keep working at these tacit roots of human knowing, bringing them to light here and there to augment our self-understanding. But as there is no prospect of unearthing even an appreciable fraction of these roots—Heidegger thought that if they were all exposed to the light of objective knowledge, nihilism would result and life would lose its hold on us—there can be no thought of the humanities ever becoming sciences. As for the social sciences, they have the option of accenting either the *social* or the *science* in their name. Doubtless they should do both, while recognizing that the further they move toward the science end of their spectrum, the more the distinctively *social* features of persons—features that distinguish them from things—will disappear from the data.

## Athens versus Jerusalem

And now, more briefly, I shall turn to the other and older dichotomy in our civilization: our legacies that derive from the Greeks, on the one hand, and the Jews and their Christian and Muslim successors on the other. It is a truism to say that Western civilization is the confluence of these two historical streams, but I have found myself increasingly restive with the standard depiction of their identities and interactions. This standard view tells us that Jerusalem gave us our religion and Athens our philosophy; in Eric Voegelin's formulation, "rivalry between two . . . Ways of Truth [*pistis*, or "faith"; *logos*, or "reason"] is the fundamental issue of Western intellectual history from the blending of Hellenism and Christianity to the present."<sup>8</sup> There is something right about this view, or it would not have acquired the hold it has: every page of Christian liturgy affirms its con-

7. I am indebted on this point to Hubert Dreyfus, my former colleague at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, now at the University of California, who over the years has taught me most of the phenomenology I know. His essay "Holism and Hermeneutics" (unpublished) has been of particular help in my present statement.

8. Eric Voegelin, *The World of the Polis* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), p. 219.

tinuity with Judaism, while our canons of precise thought owe far more to Aristotle's categories than to Hebrew Wisdom literature. But a new discipline, comparative religion, has come into being since the Athens/Jerusalem = philosophy/religion equation took shape. Thanks to it we now know better what a religious tradition looks like, and this new perspective enables us to see that it was an earlier mentality—one in which genuine religion was equated with Christianity or at most with Christianity and Judaism (all else being derogated as pagan and heathen)—that led us to look to Jerusalem alone as the city of God. I have titled one of my courses "Western Philosophy as a Great Religion" to point out this misconception; it lifts to attention seven obviously religious features of early Greek philosophy:

1. *Communal aspects.* In many ways its schools were more like communes and ashrams than schools of modern philosophy such as positivism or phenomenology.

2. *Cultic features.* In Plato's Academy one of the members was explicitly appointed to prepare the sacrifice.

3. *Ultimacy.* Epicurus' disciples addressed him as *soter* ("savior") because they saw his teaching as bestowing the greatest boon a teaching could; in this case, relief from anxiety.

4. *Involvement with the total self.* Plato's preoccupation with education derived from his conviction that the entire self—body, appetites, and will—must be properly aligned if reason is to come into its own.

5. *Theophanies.* These were manifest in the Greek myths, which were accepted as divine in origin; there were also direct epiphanies, as intimated in Plato's Allegory of the Cave, and an incarnation in the figure of Socrates.

6. *Intuitive intellect.* Plato's "eye of the soul," which, in contrast with discursive reason, stands as the Greek counterpart to St. Paul's "eyes of faith."

7. *Ontology.* The category of transcendence figures emphatically.

Not all Greek philosophy exhibits these features, of course. If we accept F.M. Cornford's division between the scientifically inclined Ionians (Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Anaxagoras, Leucippus, and Democritus) and the mystically inclined philosophers of Magna Graecia (Pythagoras, Parmenides, Heraclitus, Socrates, Plato, and Plotinus), it is of the latter line that I have been speaking. But my point remains: this tradition was as religious as was the Semitic. And it succeeded in making its case to Western civilization; if not so much as did the tradition of the Jews, at least far more than is usually recognized. In the end, the West clasps to its bosom the religiousness of the Greek philosophers alongside that of Israel's prophets.

I am proposing that instead of identifying the Greeks as philosophical and the Jews as religious, we see the spiritual geniuses of the two peoples as focused on different ontological objects, both inspiring religious fervor, though of different kinds. Whereas the Jews centered on God as possessing personal attributes (what the Indians call Saguna Brahman, or God with qualities), the Greeks focused on God's transpersonal mode (which the Indians call Nirguna Brahman, Eckhart called the Godhead, and Paul Tillich in our own time has call-



ed the God-above-God). In this transpersonal register, God's attributes are fused to a degree that our discursive intellects cannot follow, so a *via negativa*, a negative theology, is required: reason can know God only by contrasting him with what he is not. This negative approach does not prevent the Godhead from being an object of intuitive discernment (*jnana* in Sanskrit and *gnosis* in Greek: Plato's "eye of the soul"); the Indians have long insisted that God's transpersonal aspect is approached better through knowing (*jnana yoga*) than through devotion (*bhakti yoga*), the latter being better directed toward God's personal mode. Different notions of the *summum bonum* can also be detected; Semitic religion, centering on God's personal aspects, tends to associate it with moral goodness (holy righteousness), whereas the Greek thinks first of beauty, truth, and nature. Looking back on the four cultures of this essay—science, humanities, Jerusalem, and Athens—we find that when they are identified by the distinctive kinds of objects with which each is concerned, they correlate with the major classic links of the Great Chain of Being (following Plato's characterization). Thus *science* focuses on matter, or the sensible world; I have described this world as capable of being understood theoretically through distinguishable elements that are explicitly cognized and systematically related in storable laws. The *humanities* are concerned with Plato's intermediate, spirit realm; however, only the human spirit has been considered here, and even this was defined only negatively, as eluding in large measure the theoretical understanding that works well with nature. *Jerusalem*, our Semitic heritage, has been occupied with God in his personal mode, which in the Platonic scheme figures as the Demiurge, or Creator God of the *Timaeus*. *Athens*, our Greek heritage, has been unique in the West in giving sustained conceptual attention to the transpersonal God that occupies the summit of the Great Chain of Being.

In crediting Greek philosophy for attending to that summit, I do not mean that it was superior to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. I mean only that when these Semitically originated communities came to conceptualize their deepest insights, a grammar for the purpose awaited them. It was, moreover, a grammar so advanced, so carefully tuned to the highest registers of the human spirit, that Christians, Muslims, and Jews alike embraced it. In Chomskian idiom, they found its grammar to be "generic"; we need think only of the equal enthusiasm with which Philo and Maimonides, Dionysius and St. Thomas, ibn-Sina and ibn-Arabi assimilated it. The zenith of the Western religious tradition is Greek in the sense that Greece provided its grammar and vocabulary, but the discernments that this equipment was used to articulate were present in the Semitic religions from their start.

And of course the humanities are not confined to the second rung of the ladder. They extend to the third and fourth rung, as far as the ontological sensibilities of their practitioners invite.