

A MISCONCEPTION IN THE HUMANITIES

SINCE THE TURN OF THE CENTURY the humanities have been running to catch up with the natural sciences. The very language we have adopted from the sciences reflects our anxiety not to be outrun. Daily we grow more fond of such words as "science" itself, "scientific method", "laboratory", "research" and "field". We observe that the scientist owes to his laboratory not only his success as a worker, but great prestige as well: few sights impress us more than to see a scientist earnestly eliciting the truth from his test-tube, always, of course, with the marvellous aid of "the scientific method". Forthwith, we turn to the library, "our laboratory". But what use will we make of the library? It is observed—arts men can also carry out observations—that the scientist never studies; he engages in research. Henceforth, therefore, we will neither read nor study; we will be research men. But we are not scientists yet. To do research we must discover a field and, like our colleagues in science, become specialists. Now we have come a long way towards the equality we pine for. The last step is a resolution to produce and to publish. To this end we formulate the first law of contemporary scholarship: teaching and research are interdependent.

The purpose of this paper is to suggest that this semantic somersault can be performed only with the aid of a serious misconception of some essential differences between the humanities and the natural sciences. It is not necessary or desirable to attempt any definitions of "humanities": in this context the term denotes studies traditionally carried on in departments of Classics, English, Modern Languages, Philosophy, and — sometimes — History. The paper is confined to a discussion of the formal teaching and learning that go on in universities.

The misconceptions reflected in the semantic tricks just cited owe their plausibility to our overlooking, or suppressing, a fundamental distinction between the humanities and the natural sciences: the fact that in the sciences knowledge is accumulative, while in the humanities it is not. To say that knowledge is accumulative is not merely to say that facts are added to facts,

that scientists now know much more than Thales did; advance in the sciences is due not so much to the accumulation of facts as to the development of new concepts and the refinement of others. Science took a giant step forward when it abandoned the Galapagos Islands for the abstractions of the laboratory. Though we speak of revolutions in science, this metaphor obscures, therefore, the real nature of the advance; in science each generation builds on the work of its predecessors. It is not necessary to justify this claim; most people accept it, at least as a general truth.

This characteristic of scientific knowledge is the theoretical justification for the kind of approach to learning and teaching adopted in the sciences. It is because knowledge is accumulative that studies begin with the latest theories and facts, with Niels Bohr and not with Democritus. The history of science, although it is interesting and valuable in itself, forms no part of scientific studies as such.

To say that scientific knowledge is accumulative is also to say that it is public. It is public in the sense that each result or discovery can be verified by every scientist who is competent; the scientist's methods and results are public. Scientific knowledge is public in the further sense that by its nature it lends itself to team work. Thus, scientists with varying degrees of ability can work on the same project. The project is, say, the verification of an hypothesis. While the formulation of a fruitful hypothesis calls for ability of a very high order, certain measurements necessary to the verification can be carried out by people who are merely competent. When Pascal, unsatisfied with Torricelli's verification of the "sea of air" hypothesis, set out to devise a more convincing one, he enlisted the aid of his brother-in-law, Périer, to carry out a series of simple barometric measurements. The results met Pascal's demands for verification, and gave his brother-in-law a place in the history of science.

Scientific knowledge is public in a third sense. It is almost without value unless it is published. An idea kept in the scientist's mind is likely to be an idea lost. Hence if it is to be of any value, if it is to contribute to the scientific enterprise, it must be published. Had Périer made his measurements in 1966, the poor fellow would have published a paper. The scientist, then, must not only read the latest journals; it makes good sense that he should also contribute to them.

Teachers in the humanities have erred in assuming that the approach found to be successful in science is applicable to their own study and teaching. The justification for the scientist's approach, in essential questions, is no-

where found in the humanities. Here it makes no sense to speak of accumulative knowledge. In the first place, not all humanistic studies are concerned with knowledge in the ordinary or scientific sense of that term. The humanist utters such statements as "This is a beautiful painting", "That is a good man", "Wordsworth is a better poet than Lucretius". Many philosophers now hold that such propositions are emotive sentences; that is, that they *state* nothing at all, but only express or evoke emotions. But even those who contend that they are in some sense statements will agree that they are not public knowledge in the distinctive sense in which statements in science are public. Unlike scientific statements, they are subjective. Here "subjective" is used, not in the sense of "merely subjective", but in the sense that there is no publicly accepted criterion for assessing their truth, or even their meaning. Hence, how a poem or a play is judged depends not only on the intelligence and skill of the reader, but also on his values. Insofar, then, as we concern ourselves with statements of value, there is no ground for hope that knowledge will accumulate. What would it mean to say that John Stuart Mill's liberalism is better than Burke's conservatism, or that Eliot's *The Waste Land* is a better poem than *Paradise Lost*?

There is a second reason why there is no accumulation of knowledge in the humanities. It is not only the case that we utter some value-statements; one can go much farther and say that every statement is value-laden. For in considering the history of ideas, the notion of "mere knowledge" is, as A. N. Whitehead put it, "a high abstraction which we should dismiss from our minds. Knowledge is always accompanied with accessories of emotion and purpose."¹

The idea that value touches the very heart of the humanities is perhaps not so obvious as the fact that *some* of our propositions are value-judgments. An example from the writing of history will perhaps throw some light on it. All historians would now agree with Whitehead that Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* is in part "a record of the mentality of the eighteenth century," that it is Gibbon who speaks.² Yet Gibbon presents many facts about the Roman Empire. Is it possible to separate the facts from Gibbon's prejudices or values? Encouraged by recent developments in the analysis of language, according to which statements are either cognitive or emotive, many philosophers contend that in principle we can separate fact and value. Thus A. J. Ayer in his influential *Language, Truth and Logic* writes: "We shall set ourselves to show that in so far as statements of value are significant, they are ordinary "scientific" statements; that in so far as they are not scientific, they

are not in the literal sense significant, but are simply expressions of emotion which can be neither true nor false."³

But this notion is mistaken. Gibbon's work, viewed as a history, is not just a collection of statements, cognitive *or* emotive. The whole is not merely the sum of the parts; the work is a narrative and a thesis. Though it does include many individual statements which everyone would accept as statements of fact, it makes no sense to say that the history is only a collection of statements. The author's values determined the selection and arrangement of facts, and hence the importance assigned to them. One can go farther and say that the author's values created many of the facts. To remove the value from Gibbon's work, therefore, would be to produce not only a history different from Gibbon's, but no history at all.

If fact and value are inseparable in history, it is still more obvious that no separation is possible in poetry and philosophy. Far from being incidental and peripheral, value is of the essence of the humanities. "The belief in values," as Henry B. Parkes puts it, "is a necessity of the human spirit, not a deduction from the processes of the natural universe."⁴ Thus, while we need not go all the way with Fichte and say that the kind of philosophy one chooses depends upon the kind of man one is, we cannot deny that in the humanities fact and value are inextricably bound together.

In the humanities, then, we cannot in any straightforward way speak of an accumulation of knowledge. Many of our statements are not "merely cognitive" at all, and more importantly, value pervades all of them. Of course, one can *say* that Elizabethan drama is better than Greek. But to say it presupposes a set of value-judgments; we cannot escape the circle. We cannot claim that there is progress so long as there is no public criterion for measuring it. Hence only the man who is wholly given over to current values could assume that Aristotle's views on the good life, or on poetry, are less advanced than Collingwood's, or that Arthur Miller is a better dramatist than Euripides.

It seems sensible, therefore, to begin our studies in the humanities with broad, classical statements rather than with the latest piece of scholarly work; that we should begin with what Ortega y Gasset called "the system of ideas *by* which the age lives."⁵ This is not to say that ancient writers are wiser than contemporary writers. The point is that in the humanities "ancient" and "modern" are little more than labels to mark a writer's place in time. Nor is it assumed that problems hold their relative importance from age to age, or that men's responses to problems will be invariable from one generation to an-

other. But it follows from the fact that knowledge is not accumulative that we should expect the classics, for anything we know in advance, to throw light on our problems, or, perhaps more often, to show us that our question is idle. As one writer put it, "It was the colossal triumph of the Greeks and Romans and of the great thinkers of the Middle Ages to sound the depths of almost every problem which human nature has to offer, and to interpret human thought and human aspiration with astounding profundity and insight."⁶

We study the past, then, not because we have a blind reverence for it, not to recapture a golden age, but simply because most illuminating works belong to the past. Whereas ninety percent of the world's scientists are living today, it is no exaggeration to say that of the world's great philosophers, poets and men of letters, ninety percent died before we were born. To look to the great classical expressions of human experience, therefore, does not mean that we ourselves are dead; it is recognition that the dead are alive. As T. S. Eliot so nicely put it, "the historical sense involves a perception not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence."⁷

While accepting this praise of the classics, someone might still deny that studies in the humanities ought to begin with what I have called the great expressions of human experience. It could be argued that we should begin, like the sciences, with what is called, often quite wrongly, a study in depth, with emphasis on scholarly minutiae. But this would be to make the dialogue between teacher and student almost meaningless. At the end of a long and distinguished career as a classicist at Harvard, E. K. Rand observed: "The ancient tree of learning did not fail to grow; it put forth new branches and new fruit. We have made the mistake of not allowing the learner to see the tree for the branches; and we boost him into some upper branch to make his little nest there."⁸ Any minute piece of work in the humanities will almost certainly fail to raise a question, let alone an answer, unless it comes clothed in a variety of associations, historical, philosophical, and literary. The point is that the approach that seems to be sensible in the sciences is inappropriate to the humanities. As the American scholar, James Harvey Robinson, put it, "Specialization, so essential in research, is putting us on the wrong track in education."⁹

The fact that in the humanities knowledge is not accumulative also means that it is more difficult for us to engage in what the graduate schools call "original research". The great human themes have been explored by genius from Plato to Milton and Kant. It is therefore difficult to say something new; most scholars can only hope to be readers and interpreters. But

the work of interpretation itself demands ability of a high order, which is found in only a few people in each generation. Hence it hardly seems possible to escape the conclusion that most teachers, if they would be publishers, must content themselves with minutiae. Far from improving one's understanding, however, this kind of activity is more likely to cut off the sources of knowledge and dry up the wells of the spirit. Already in the second decade of this century, President Hibben of Princeton was sounding the warning: "The restricted field of investigation demanding an intensity of sustained application and concentrated attention is in itself conducive to a narrowing of scholarly interest, to a limiting of the sources of knowledge, and to a circumscribing of the range of desire and appreciation."¹⁰

In any case, there are already far too many "scholarly" articles. Outside the universities, men turn to the classics to escape articles about them: a great many scholars, as Whitehead once remarked, "are engaged in reducing men of genius to the commonplace."¹¹ Yet, in our anxiety to parallel the research of scientists, we have filled the journals and are every day founding more. We are filling them with critiques of critiques of critiques; we are even resorting to the anti-book and the anti-article, in which we show either that the original ought not to have been written, or that it ought to have been written in another way; we have displaced ideas by a study of the language in which they are expressed; and literature is being displaced by talk about it. "Literary scholarship as we know it," Mark Van Doren observed, "is most at home among the small books it can explain, the imperfect ones that have palpable sources in other books."¹²

The assumption that every teacher ought to engage in publishing is bad for many teachers and injurious to students. The teacher, having been led by the graduate school to suppose that his higher degree, if not an outward sign of genius, is at least a good substitute for it, and encouraged by research in the sciences, comes to his first job radiant in the hope that his thoughts and research can soon be given to the waiting world. But he soon discovers that between his innermost thoughts and the written page the distance is great. His confidence shaken, but not destroyed, he now reasons that the work-load is too heavy, and with no less acuity proclaims that funds in aid of research are woefully short. In a word, he is obliged to turn to minutiae. And if, as is often the case, he lacks the ability or interest to do even this kind of research, the groves of Academe become for him a valley of dry bones. But there is nothing mysterious about this transformation. As Samuel P. Capen in his

study of the preparation of college teachers concluded, the vast majority of college teachers have no special talent for research.

The assumption that all teachers ought to be engaged in research leading to publication is also injurious to the student. Teachers who are engaged in research have less time to give to teaching generally, and to individual students in particular. As John Henry Newman remarked, "While teaching involves external engagements, the natural home for experiment and speculation is retirement."¹⁴ Pythagoras, Newman reminds us, lived for a time in a cave; Thales "lived unmarried and in private, and refused the invitation of princes"; while Newton's quiet meditations "almost shook his reason." Of course, time given to research would be well spent if a man's researches made him a better teacher. There is, however, not a shred of evidence to support this conclusion. Indeed, the point is that it is not a conclusion at all, but an assumption. And many distinguished educators and teachers have rejected it. As early as 1912, a professor of Classics felt constrained to observe: "[There are teachers] who, possessing a natural aptitude for thinking in millimeters, find in the minutiae of their doctoral training life's great attraction, and commence a long career of closet-study, which is interrupted only by the demands of such physical functions as eating and sleeping, and totally unfits them to inspire [the student] with anything but disgust."¹⁵ More than half a century ago, at a time when ambitious plans were being drawn up for graduate work in the liberal arts colleges, a minority of educators in the United States were expressing the fear that the new emphasis on research in undergraduate institutions would result in poorer teaching, and hence in a decline of liberal education. Daniel Gilman, the first president of Johns Hopkins University, wrote: "I can never rid myself of the belief that the essential value of the university does not depend upon the discoveries it makes, or the knowledge it accumulates and imparts, but in the characters which it develops."¹⁶ Gilman was not, of course, underestimating the value of research; like Professor Harper of Yale, G. Stanley Hall of Clark, and President Tappan of the University of Michigan, he believed that teaching and research were two distinct functions which could be more successfully performed in separate institutions. John Henry Newman had already expressed the same view: "The nature of the case and the history of philosophy combine to recommend to us this division of intellectual labour between Academies and Universities. To discover and to teach are distinct functions; they are also distinct gifts, and are not commonly found united in the same person."¹⁷

In aping the natural sciences we are making a grave and inexcusable

mistake. It is wrong to adopt the scientist's approach to learning, research, and publication. Scientific knowledge is accumulative, value is not. The history of science is a history of the advancement of knowledge; the humanities record the ebb and flow of the human spirit.

NOTES

1. *Adventures of Ideas* (Cambridge: University Press, 1961), p. 12.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
3. *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1955), pp. 102-3.
4. *Gods and Men: the Origins of Western Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959), p. 238.
5. *Mission of the University*. Trans. by H. L. Nostrand (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1946), p. 64.
6. Nicholas M. Butler, quoted in R. M. Hutchins, *The Higher Learning in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1936), p. 80.
7. "Tradition and the Individual Talent", quoted in A. W. Levi, *Philosophy and the Modern World* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1959), p. 24.
8. "Bring Back the Liberal Arts", *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 171, Number 6 (June, 1943), pp. 79-80.
9. Quoted in E. J. McGrath, *The Graduate School and the Decline of Liberal Education* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), p. 22.
10. "The Type of Graduate Scholar", quoted in E. J. McGrath, *op. cit.*, p. 22.
11. *Dialogues of Alfred Whitehead*. Recorded by Lucien Price (London: Max Reinhardt, 1954), p. 334.
12. *Liberal Education* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1943), p. 49.
13. "Preparation of the College Instructor for His Job", quoted in E. J. McGrath, *op. cit.*, p. 24.
14. *The Idea of a University* (London, 1873), p. xiv.
15. W. B. McDaniel, "Research and the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy", quoted in E. J. McGrath, *op. cit.*, p. 21.
16. *Eighth Annual Report of the President of Johns Hopkins University*, quoted in E. J. McGrath, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-17.
17. *Op. cit.*, p. xiii.