

The Relationship between Science and the Humanities  
*In Perspective*  
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Too often we view the sciences and humanities as warring factions. The humanist calls the scientist a "numbers-cruncher," and the scientist retorts by accusing the humanist of lack of rigor. In reality, both are engaged in an effort to understand and explain the nature of the universe and humankind's place in that universe, sometimes using different methods and perspectives, and at other times employing remarkably similar approaches.

The humanities, commonly defined as languages, literature, history, the arts, and philosophy, were first identified as such at the beginning of the fourteenth century, when Italian scholars began intensive studies of Greek and Roman culture. The humanities as they developed during the early Renaissance focussed on ancient Greek and Latin literature, oratory, and letter-writing. Later, a number of scholars translated the scientific writings of the ancients, to whom science was a part of philosophy. The study of humanistic thought was spread throughout the great European universities by Italian scholars and by the many northern Europeans who came to Italy to study medicine and law.

During the Renaissance and, indeed, well into this century, an educated person was one who was well grounded in the humanities, including several ancient and modern languages, the sciences, and mathematics. The rift between the humanist and the scientist is of very recent origin and results from a tendency to specialize more and more narrowly and at an earlier point in a person's academic life.

It is ironic that many of the most vehement defenders of the essentially artificial division are philosophers who know no Greek or Latin and chemists who know nothing of quantum mechanics. In the last few years, however, members of the medical and scientific community have shown increasing concern for the perspective the humanities can bring to their disciplines. Social scientists and historians are using many of the research techniques once used exclusively by the so-called hard sciences, while physics, once the most abstract and mathematical of the natural sciences, engages in speculation about consciousness and uncertainty. Perhaps we are on the threshold of a renaissance in which educated persons will once again be conversant with the major thoughts of ancient and modern scholars regardless of their disciplines.