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Affinities Between Scientists and Humanists

A Commission on the Humanities, sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation, recently issued a report on the state and role of the humanities in American life.* Scientists should take heed and take heart.

For possibly the first time, a diverse group of representatives of the humanities—from schools, colleges, and universities; from libraries, the media, and public life; from foundations, museums, and business—has summoned the humanities and modern liberal education to acknowledge, rather than flee, the realities and consequences of science and technology. "If the aim is to make invention creative and humane," the Commission insists, "knowledge of the humanities must be coupled with an understanding of the characteristics of scientific inquiry and technological change. Liberal education must define scientific literacy as no less important a characteristic of the educated person than reading and writing."

Yet, asserts the Commission, if humanists bear responsibilities, long disregarded, toward the sciences, so too scientists must accept reciprocal obligations toward the humanities. "When scientists and technicians are deeply concerned about questions raised by their unprecedented success in transforming the human environment, when questions of value, responsibility, and freedom can no longer be seen as falling outside the province of scientific activity, dialogue with humanists becomes increasingly important. . . . To be a good scientist, one must be more than a scientific specialist."

Lest such truths become mere truisms, however, scientists and humanists must go beyond the Commission's injunction and accept the deep intellectual affinity between their fields. The sciences, like the humanities, are not merely subjects of study but also ways of pursuing knowledge in its many manifestations. Both—contrary to the self-congratulatory views of some people from both groups—represent the great achievements of the human mind and spirit. Both, in their distinctive manner, have created and revealed the beauties and awesome realities of nature and human civilization. It serves no purpose, nor is it accurate, to think otherwise.

Nor is it wise for scientists to deprecate the ingredients of judgment, intuition, and ambiguity in the work of the humanities or for humanists to conceive of science and technology as the products of mere positivism. As we now know, the intellectual grandeur and predicaments shared by the sciences and humanities are as numerous and profound as the qualities and problems that may distinguish them. Scholars in both worlds confront the fragmentation and uncertainty of all knowledge and are faced with weak public understanding and declining support. And both scientists and humanists know the peril of claiming too much—that knowledge of Shakespeare makes for right conduct or that familiarity with the universe will put an end to human ills and discontent.

Sharing so much, the sciences and the humanities must therefore now conclude a new partnership on behalf of all knowledge and understanding. The communities of both—though the community of the humanities remains far less organized—should become more closely involved at all levels and in all pursuits. For without joint efforts—intellectual, institutional, and civic—both will suffer and, along with them, American culture will suffer, too.

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**The Humanities in American Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1980. xiii + 192 pp.