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Rethinking the Humanities and the Sciences

The Editors

History of Humanities, now in its third year, has proposed to connect the humanities disciplines in a new way. In this issue our authors aim to do so by asking whether the humanities and sciences are different endeavors for understanding the world and ourselves. In the Forum section of the current issue, the divide that C. P. Snow identified in his famous 1959 lecture is at stake again. If Snow's distinction between science and humanities might seem obsolete, this is not true for the surprisingly varied answers to why that divide is worth questioning. Julian Hamann, for one, argues that when a distinction between *Geisteswissenschaften* and *Naturwissenschaften* emerged in the late nineteenth century, both sides shared a common notion of knowledge, or *Wissenschaft*. Michael Hagner's contribution takes up the thread to contextualize Snow's concept of two cultures and demonstrates how a pocketbook encyclopedia on "all fields within science" was not only contemporary to Snow's lecture but also tried to overcome the divide on several levels. As Fabian Krämer emphasizes, the concept of the two cultures also helps to understand that there never was a true divide, at least not if one looks at the activities and methods of the scholars themselves. Viktoria Tkaczyk shows how the alleged two sides were in fact entangled in the epistemic aspirations of the young discipline of theater studies after 1900. Rens Bod traces a *longue durée* history of methods that focus on patterns as opposed to singularities. Like Tkaczyk, he demonstrates that it is often misleading to attribute scholarly endeavors to a single—either scientific or humanistic—category. Anthony Grafton's essay, which concludes the Forum, focuses on early modern medicine. Here again the divide crumbles, as even scholars who did not hesitate to allocate their work to a single field, be it medicine, natural history, or philology, were wont to combine different methods. A history of the humanities that aims to single out the disciplines we know nowadays as the humanities would therefore have to be written across the divide, if there ever was one.

Not only do the contributions to the Forum discuss two cultures; they also explore how the histories of the sciences and the humanities can merge in a single debate. As

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opposed to the recent ambition to write comparative histories of the humanities, the history of science as a discipline has been developing for more than a century. This led to a sense of unity in this field and its quest for a common epistemology among the different branches of the natural sciences. Although the theory of knowledge and philosophy of science do not form a unified, homogeneous activity, let alone one that would provide a theoretical model accepted within the history of science, there have nevertheless been successful attempts to bring the sides in contact, to share fora, and to eventually work toward a common frame of reference. This has yet to be done for the history of the humanities. As the authors of a recent chrestomathy of texts on the theory of the humanities stated, philosophy is itself “not a humanities discipline, but a discipline of systematic reflection, which itself does not specialize in one single object area; it is also accountable for theorizing on the humanities.”¹ The same authors state that the natural sciences have dominated such theorizing. Other scholarly disciplines, or *Wissenschaften*, were left out, to the point of doubting that their scientific status was on par with the model of the natural sciences. What, then, could an epistemology of the humanities be, given that the term *humanities* already poses problems of definition? Perhaps this question can be asked to a similar effect as Paul Valéry—certainly a “literary intellectual” in the sense of C. P. Snow—put it when trying to write a philosophy of dance. The question “What is dance?” paralyzes the “philosopher,” making him feel like Saint Augustine, who thought he knew what time is, but, upon further reflection, felt overwhelmed by the impossibility to grasp it. Dance is certainly an art of time, as Valéry’s philosopher continues to deliberate, and if this at first only adds to the paralyzing effect, it then puts him somewhat at ease: “He has wedded two difficulties to each other. Each one, taken separately, left him perplexed and without resources; but now they are linked together. Perhaps their union will be fertile.”²

Conceiving of the humanities and their histories in this Augustinian vein has been an implicit aim for *History of Humanities* since the first issue, when Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, historian of science and proponent of a historical epistemology, argued that the “fundamental transformation of the disciplinary dichotomy between nature and culture, matter and spirit” has encouraged philosophers to tear down that very dichotomy.³ The present issue continues this discussion by giving room to a philosophical approach again. Rik Peels argues that the humanities pursue the same values as the

1. Athena Panteos and Tim Rojek, “Einleitung” [Introduction], *Texte zur Theorie der Geisteswissenschaften* [Texts on the Theory of the Humanities] (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2016), 9.

2. Paul Valéry, “Philosophy of Dance,” *Salmagundi* 33/34 (Spring–Summer 1976): 68.

3. Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, “Nature and Culture in the Prism of Knowledge,” *History of Humanities* 1, no. 1 (2016): 155.

sciences. No wonder, then, that here Snow's two cultures again take center stage. Another contribution, by Oliver O'Donnell, explores how epistemic ideals from the natural sciences have unexpectedly reared their heads in a niche of the humanities, namely, iconology. The analysis narrows down to a single painting—Titian's *Venus Blinding Cupid*, which graces this journal's cover—that was the focus of debate between Edgar Wind and Erwin Panofsky. Three other essays, by Stella Gevorgyan, Larry McGrath, and Elise Garritzen, while not addressing the issue of the “two cultures,” fulfill the comprehensive aims of *History of Humanities* by exploring different transnational, political, and practical dimensions of scholarship: the circulation of linguistic knowledge, the role of humanists as intellectual ambassadors, and the importance of paratexts for understanding history books.

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